Performing Materiality:

Rethinking the Subject-Object Relationship as a Site of Exchange in Performance Practice

by

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Nesreen Hussein, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: ______________________ Date: ___22 September 2011______

Abstract

This thesis reconsiders the relationship between the human subject and the physical object in performance practice, which has been commonly perceived within hierarchical systems of instrumentalisation. The thesis demonstrates that in processes of performance making and reception, the role of physical objects goes beyond mimesis and direct representation. Physical objects and materials have the capacity to take active parts in a complex and multilayered performance dynamic, articulating ways of seeing and offering new ways of assessing performance. Drawing on Hegel's conception, the notion of 'objectification' is central to this dynamic, approached as a positive model of the subject's potential development and as a productive catalyst in a creative process, which goes against the negative connotations engrained in the term.

The thesis is grounded on three case studies from recent live performances, following the journey of the object throughout different modalities of presentation: an opera production, where the object is key and a point of departure for the devising process; a performance installation, where the shifting boundary between performer and object is negotiated as a politically charged vehicle of expression; and a performance based on the act of 'telling,' where the language itself approaches the status of object, materialising an experience from the past in a way that extends the notions of materiality and site-specificity beyond physical boundaries. In each of the cases, the interaction between the subject and the object is emphasised as dialectical and reciprocal, rather than hierarchical or subordinate. In different ways, each side takes part in constructing the other, while the authority of the written text as the bearer of meaning and as the starting point is destabilised. The practices highlight the creative, philosophical and political significance of the unstable dynamic between subjects and objects, offering conceptual lenses through which other examples of practice can be viewed. The case studies raise wider questions on the nature of the subject-object tension, and its capacity to situate and define our relationship to the self and to the world.

By employing a multiplicity of analytical and philosophical frameworks in the humanities and social sciences, and by evaluating a larger body of theoretical and practical approaches to objects in modernist and contemporary paradigms, the thesis offers a detailed analysis of what occurs through a performance situation and how the object in each case study actively contributes to the making process in ways that employ, and also transgress, the object’s material limitations. The author’s position as a participant-observer, and at times a performer, allows for experiential understanding of the tension inherent in the subject-object dynamic and its practical implications.

Recognising the nature of performance as fundamentally subversive of binary closure, the thesis concludes with proposing a conceptual framework that adds to the understanding of human experience and performance. It emphasises ‘ambiguity’ as an unresolved state of existence intrinsic to the relationship between the subject and the object in both performance and the social world. The thesis proposes new approaches to performance making that invest in the object’s potential as a mobilising element that embodies meanings, values and social relations.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Reconsidering The Subject-Object Relationship in Theatre and Performance Practices

1.1. Introduction

> Each item
> In her stock is hand picked: straps and belts
> Pewter boxes and ammunition pouches; hand picked too
> The chicken and the stick which at the end
> The old woman twists through the draw-rope
> The Basque woman's board on which she bakes her bread
> And the Greek woman's board of shame, strapped to her back
> With holes for her hands to stick through, the Russian's
> Jar of lard, so small in the policeman's hand; all
> Selected for age, function and beauty
> By the eyes of the knowing
> The hands of the bread-baking, net-weaving
> Soup-cooking connoisseur
> Of reality. (Brecht, 'Weigel's Props' 427-28)

Our existence as human subjects is closely associated with materiality, which is not a necessarily inert or an essentially passive construct. Materiality is actively accommodating of, and accommodated by, the human subject in dialectical modes of interaction and exchange. Material things have the capacity to act as provocations and a result of action. Such active relationship with things requires the ability to follow the path of the thing's history and its intrinsic materiality. A close examination of this dynamic between people and things provides ways for enhancing performance practice and understanding our relationships to the self and the other. The section from Bertolt Brecht's poem above exemplifies the close connection between the life of objects and that of human subjects. It demonstrates Brecht's concern with 'real' objects that bring to the stage their own past history of work and human usage, instead of using artificially constructed, purely theatrical props. This poem is placed at the opening of the thesis because of the multiple links it makes, and that resonate throughout this study: links between the object, the world (the object's life, history, patina of use, inherent materiality) and the gesture contained within it; between these gestures and the life of the character that they convey; and between the object and the human user, or the actor, who takes part in activating its expressive potentials. The poem is a celebration of people and objects, how they both give each other meanings and values, and how they share their 'lives' onstage and outside of it. It is also a celebration of the theatre itself as a place where this exchange happens, paying homage to life and to beings, the animate and the inanimate. Brecht's poem underlines issues that are at the heart of this thesis and demonstrates an attitude towards physical things that constitutes one of the driving forces behind initiating this study.

Stemming from a wider interest in materiality in the intersecting spheres of theatre, performance and visual arts, this study is concerned with pushing further the discourse on the relationship between physical objects and the human entity. It is also an attempt to respond to the dearth of sufficient critical writings on the subject-object tension and its implications in theatre and performance practices and reception. This relationship is seen here as an integral dimension of those practices, helpful to the study of the creative, social and cultural forces embodied within them. Throughout the history of performance, objects have been always present alongside the human performer: from the masks of classical Greek and Roman theatres, to the props and special effects on the Elizabethan stage, the elaborate costumes of eighteenth-century theatre, to the realistically detailed scenery of realism and naturalism. This was followed by modernist theatre with its emphasis on formalism and instrumentality in the theatrical field including the performers' bodies. The latter influenced subsequent generations of artists in avant-garde and postmodernist theatres in considering the materiality of both objects and human bodies. Examples of objects from non-Western performance traditions include the mask in the Japanese Noh theatre, the fan in Korean Pansori, the puppets of Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern theatres, the masks in West African rituals, the dancing bells of classical Indian dance, among many other objects that have been at the centre of the performance event. In spite of the important part played by material objects throughout the history of Western and non-Western performance practices and traditions, contextualised attention to their roles and capacities have been rarely paid in systematic and focused studies.

This thesis stresses that in looking at processes of performance making and reception, it is not enough to focus on the agency of the human subject while placing things at the margins as 'lifeless' or passive elements. The role of physical objects goes beyond serving as mere background for the dramatic action, or existing as secondary to the process of meaning making. They have the capacity to take active parts in the complex and multilayered performance dynamics. Being physically present in time and space, the object takes part in shaping and defining that space and has an impact upon its human users. The subject-object interaction in this context is seen as necessarily dialectical rather than hierarchical; reciprocal rather than subordinate, initiating meanings, language and also complications, as will be demonstrated throughout the thesis. Therefore, rather than focusing on one side of that relationship, the focus of this study will shift between the subject (the human performer, the body, the creator, the user and the viewer) and the object (the physical components, objects and materials negotiated during a creative process) as two entities that can be active separately and also by sharing a performance field. This includes the moments when the subject and the object exchange places, even momentarily, in the performance space.

The study does not fixate on physical objects alone, for the different levels of human direct or indirect interaction are crucial factors in defining the role of the object. If objects are endowed with certain efficacy, as I try to argue, it is neither manifest nor observable without a relationship with human subjects. Thus the capacity of this intrinsic relationship to articulate ways of seeing and understanding becomes the main question underlying this thesis. It is not a study of stage 'props,' of the physical construction, or the design of theatrical productions. But it looks at the relationship between the subject and the object as a fluid process that is constantly shifting, with each side causing changes and transformations in the other. This process occurs in the space of performance, during the making, the performing, and also in front of spectators. The study examines closely the connotations evoked during such processes and their practical implications in performance practice, which have a significant impact on methods of meaning making and processes of reception. This relationship and its implications establish firm connections between the creative process and its wider cultural, historical and political contexts.

In order to demonstrate some of the ways by which the relationship between subject and object can be rethought within the frames of theatre and performance, the thesis locates three instances of practice that place objects and materials at their centre. These practices, from the theatre, visual and performance art, consciously invest in a relationship between humans and things, which has wider implications in the works' creative processes, production and reception. The practices raise important questions on the nature of the subject-object tension; how it can situate and define our relationship to the self and to the world. They also highlight potential problems that emerge from a relationship with an object that is fundamentally indifferent and different, which in itself can be a rich source of inspiration and productivity. The difference of the object in those practices does not constitute a source of anxiety, or a reason to push the object to the side, but it is acknowledged and incorporated as part of the production experiences.

The thesis reassesses the status of the subject-object relationship within different modalities of presentation that reflect a concern with the crossovers between them. These modalities are located within the frames of devised theatre, performance and the shared space between performance and visual arts. The object is actively present within those frames in different ways, sometimes intertwined with the presence of the subject. This inevitably leads to considering the issue of 'objectification' of the subject, seen as a state and as a necessary process that occurs in time and space under certain conditions of a performance. The concept of objectification has often been placed within negative ideological frameworks as a cause for the devaluation of human experiences, particularly emphasised in Marxist perspectives. I do not intend to oppose these positions, but to propose an alternative reading of objectification as a productive dynamic in a creative process that takes part in constructing the self and its relationship to the others. Objectification, which is discussed in detail in Chapter Two, goes beyond the common ‘negative’ implications of the term, emphasising a positive process of generating performance values helpful for a critical evaluation of human experiences. The process of creative production shared between subjects and objects turns objectification into a key notion for what occurs between the two in creative contexts.

In order to set the scene, the thesis starts in this chapter by identifying the scope of the study, locating it within a wider historical discourse in modernist and contemporary paradigms, concepts and practices. It also identifies the thesis’s methodology and its conceptual framework. Chapter Two, in addition to contextualising the notion of objectification, locates it in examples from social and creative practices, and provides a bridge to the analyses and observations of the case studies in chapters Three, Four and Five. Those three chapters constitute the core of the thesis in which aspects of the subject-object relationship are examined in different contexts, and through which propositions for enriching processes of performance making and new ways of seeing are proposed.[1] The aim in those chapters is to highlight the performative, philosophical and political significance of the unstable dynamic between subjects and objects, offering conceptual lenses through which other examples of practice can be viewed and analysed, as well as offering propositions for enhancing practice. The thesis concludes with Chapter Six that considers the study’s broader issues and its potential for future research. Rather than pinpointing specific answers, the concluding chapter emphasises ‘ambiguity’ as an unresolved state of existence intrinsic to the relationship between the subject and the object in both performance and in the social world. Recognising the nature of performance as fundamentally subversive of binary closure opens up wider possibilities for experiencing the uniqueness of the performance event, and proposes a cultural paradigm that exposes, rather than tries to resolve, paradoxes, contradictions and differences.

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[1] More details on the subjects of each of those chapters are presented in the section on the thesis’s methodology towards the end of this chapter.

This first chapter starts by locating the focus of this thesis, the perspective and the approach it adopts towards physical objects and the understanding of their position in theatre and performance practice. It then traces the shifting attitude towards material things in Western philosophical and critical paradigms. This is achieved by looking at selected texts and works of visual art that draw on the contested subject-object binary, showing attitudes ranging between ambivalence towards it and recognising its productive potential. These examples are by no means exhaustive, nor are they comprehensive. The scholarly and artistic works are selected for the issues that they raise and because they inform some of the key notions running through the thesis. Those issues are: the radically shifting boundary between subject and object, evident in modernist performance practices; the dialogic exchange between subjects and objects in performance from a phenomenological perspective; and the question of the 'agency' of the object in relation to that of the human subject articulated in discourses of material culture studies. Those will be highlighted in the critical works examined; each will be briefly introduced, critiqued and illustrated by examples when relevant. Not all attitudes evident in the examined literature will be adopted in this thesis; some will be critiqued or even countered. The chapter then moves to presenting the thesis's research and critical approaches. It briefly introduces the three case studies, situating them in relation to the overall thesis, identifying their subjects, key questions and conceptual frameworks.

1.2. Mapping the Terrain: Which Objects?

In my quest to reconsider the subject-object relationship, seen as fundamental in a performance process, my focus is on objects as elements that are not necessarily subordinate to the human subject in their capacities as bearers of meanings and performance values. The idea of 'performing objects' itself has commonly been associated with forms of puppetry and object animation; forms that in many cases work to transform inanimate figures or found everyday objects into characters. The common definitions of *puppet* in the English language tie the word itself to systems of representation and subjugation. In contemporary English dictionaries, such as *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (1990), *puppet* is indicated as 'a small figure representing a human being or animal and moved by various means as entertainment.' It is also 'a person whose actions are controlled by another' (970).[2] In the context of theatre, *The Cassell Companion to Theatre* (1997) defines 'puppet theatre' as a 'form of dramatic entertainment in which the characters are represented by dolls' (374). These definitions evidently model the puppet on human or animal characteristics whether in their forms (a puppet resembling a human figure, or everyday objects turned into human or animal body parts), or ways of action and expression (the way a puppet expresses grief or happiness, for example). This understanding of performing objects in performance is common among contemporary scholars and practitioners in the fields of puppetry and object theatre. Frank Proschan in 'The Semiotic Study of Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects' (1983) uses the term 'performing objects' as that which describes '*material images*

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[2] *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995), as well as *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English* (2002) similarly define *puppet* as a model of a person or animal that can be moved or manipulated in various ways by humans. It is also defined as a person or organisation that has lost their independence and are controlled by somebody else (*Longman* 1147; *Oxford Collocations* 608).

of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance' (4). The term's focal point, for him, includes wider manifestations of puppets and masks. Proschan's perception of performing objects implies a close association and imitation between the physical object and the subject it represents. He explains that by referring to 'material images of humans, animals, or spirits' he imposes a 'minimal requirement of iconicity (factual resemblance, similarity, likeness) between a material object (sign-vehicle) and the animate being for which it stands' (5). The object is primarily created as a materialisation of human consciousness. In this form of mimetic, direct representation, the will of the performer and her/his understanding of the basis of iconicity, and what things are like or unlike, necessarily inform the shape and the performance of objects. Not to mention how the performance forms and movement vocabulary, often imposed on the object, become modeled on the subject's understanding of them.[3] This is emphasised in the common use of the term 'manipulation' in relation to puppets, used in Proschan's definition of puppetry as 'the manipulation of inanimate figures by human hands in dramatic performance' (3). The object in these cases becomes fully dominated by the human performer. The object's own embedded material properties become excluded from the performance's dynamic, and it turns into a medium for the projection of the self; a mirror that reflects back the subjectivities of both performer and spectator. This 'urge to give life to nonliving things' and 'using material images as surrogates for human actors' is explicitly articulated in various ways throughout Proschan's article and in other writings on puppet theatre (Proschan 3).

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[3] In a workshop on puppetry I participated in led by performer and puppeteer Finn Caldwell of Blind Summit theatre company that was held at Royal Holloway, University of London (2007), the animation of puppets was dominated by directing and acting techniques originally intended for human actors, and that placed great emphasis on subjective and internal emotions that stemmed from our understanding of them. The process of puppet animation was very similar to directing human actors, which, in my view, restricted the performance potentials of the puppets. The workshop culminated in pseudo-realistic performances from the puppets that seemed somewhat contrived.

John Bell, a leading figure in the field of puppet and object theatre, published the edited volume *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects* (2001) in response to the lack of a systematic, continuing and connected academic dialogue on performing objects (Bell, 'Puppets' 5). In his article from this volume, titled 'Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects at the End of the Century,' Bell outlines the scope of the field by tracing some of the major theoretical contributions on performing objects since the nineteenth century. His account is comprehensive but brief in its parts, not clarifying in detail the specificities of the writings or the paradigms he refers to. Bell, who cites Proschan's definition of 'performing object' at the opening of his article, acknowledges the inclusiveness of that notion and how it can include performance forms that are 'neither puppet- nor mask-centered,' giving examples from Fernand Léger's analysis of the role of manufactured objects in performance (Bell 9). However, Bell's consideration of those 'unconventional' forms of performing objects is fleeting, dedicating the majority of the article to demonstrate the various writings and resources on puppetry, mask, and object theatre in the twentieth century.

Stephen Kaplin in the same volume also adopts, and cites, Proschan's understanding of performing objects (Kaplin 19). Kaplin demonstrates a limited view of the dynamic of the puppet-performer relationship in arguing that 'while actors animate a sign vehicle from the inside out, using their own feelings, bodies, and voices, puppet performers must learn to inhabit the sign vehicle from the outside in' (19). The author does not clarify this inside/outside dynamic, which implies narrow conceptions of both acting and puppetry. At the centre of Kaplin's article is the 'puppet tree,' which he proposes as a system of classification based on the puppet/performer relationship. This tree is built around two quantifiable aspects of this relationship: distance and ratio. By 'distance' he means the level of separation and contact between the performer and the object, starting from the point of absolute contact at the bottom of the tree, and extending upward towards more remote contacts. 'Ratio' refers to the number of performing objects in comparison to the numbers of performers (Kaplin 22). This classificatory model is indeed helpful for looking at certain forms of puppetry and object animation, but defining the relationship to objects in terms of 'distance' and 'ratio' alone emphasises the hierarchical views of the subject-object dynamic commonly embedded in approaches to object theatre. The term 'manipulation' reappears in Kaplin's article reflecting the authoritative stance evident in Proschan's. Approaching physical objects within this attitude is restricted by the sense of superiority of the performer and the reliance on preconceived ideas about our relationship to things and how they participate in the world.

In a roundtable discussion titled 'What Can the Puppet Teach the Actor?' that was part of a four-day conference on the theme of *How to Act* at Central School of Speech and Drama (2007), established contemporary puppeteers and object theatre practitioners from the United Kingdom commented on their relationships and attitudes towards puppets.[4] Many of these comments stress the sense of hierarchy inherent in common approaches to puppet theatre, and the domination of humanistic and subjective notions of performance, movement, acting, and so on. Practitioners from Organic Theatre remarked that puppets provide a means to externalise aspects of the self and to 'split one's consciousness.' For theatre and puppetry director Mervyn Millar, puppetry is a 'frame of mind — the actor who believes in the independent life of the object can portray emotion through a cup or marionette.' Puppeteer Stephen Mottram believes that 'the puppeteer needs to be fully in control of how he appears to the audience and at the same time not appear overly technical. This requires training akin to that possessed by classical musicians.' Director Mark Down of Blind Summit puppet theatre company argued that the techniques of breathing and focus he uses to train actor-puppeteers are 'the same as actors use in actor-centred work, except that the actors must "throw" their centres by an act of imagination into the puppet' (Cohen, 'Puppets'). I do not deny the value of the work undertaken by the practitioners mentioned, however, their comments demonstrate that, in a Platonic sense, the puppet as a representation is seen as a tool for the projection of human perceptions. It becomes part of what Hélène Cixous describes as a 'Platonic dilemma where everything secondary is always inferior in relation to the primary' (40). Some of the comments suggest a Cartesian separation of body and mind; subject and object, assuming the ability to split the two while interacting with the objects or puppets.

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[4] All practitioners' comments indicated below are quoted as they are presented in Matthew Isaac Cohen's report of the discussion published in *Animations Online* (2007).

On the other hand, other contemporary theatre practitioners who took part in the above discussion questioned forms of object theatre that foster a hierarchical attitude towards physical objects, which is exemplified in the work of the theatre company Improbable; the subject of one of the case studies examined in this thesis. Improbable's co-artistic director Phelim McDermott warned of the overemphasis on skill predominant in discourses on puppetry. He argued that what is necessary is to ‘have a dialogic relation with the object that is animated in order for the object to tell you what it wants to do’ (Cohen, ‘Puppets’). Also director Luis Boy of Norwich Puppet Theatre argued against the ‘humanistic’ approach to puppetry advocated by most of the other participants in the discussion. He called for a move away from the focus on the representation of the human figure, and to embrace the limitations of the puppets as their essence. By this, Boy argues, realms of abstraction similar to those that have fuelled innovation in modern art over the last century can be re-explored as a way of enriching contemporary practice (Cohen, ‘Puppets’).

In this thesis, I do not oppose, or intend to marginalise, forms of puppetry and object animation in my discussion of objects and physical materials. One of the contemporary theatre companies I am approaching as a case study in this thesis employs forms of object animation as part of its creative methods. The specific dialectical relationship between human performer and physical object that this study is concerned with, and that is implied in McDermott and Boy’s comments to a certain extent, is not demonstrated in the forms of puppetry that foster hierarchical attitudes towards objects. The thesis is concerned with the object that is pushed beyond mimesis; beyond direct representation or imitation of organic forms. It also draws attention to the productive and creative potentials and the performance values offered by the object’s embedded materiality, capacities as well as limitations. The field of study identified in this thesis, therefore, does not precisely fall under the category of conventional ‘object theatre.’ It does not locate the objects within a dramatic form that is conditioned by representation, a narrative or direct ways of telling stories. In the frame of this thesis, the objects can be the source and the generators of narratives and meanings through their inherent materiality, as will be demonstrated in the practices discussed in this chapter as well as in the subsequent chapters. The object in this case is seen as a participant in a form of exchange with the human performer; sometimes exchanging roles, and always contributing to the action.

1.3. The Problem of the Subject and the Object in Western Critical Models

This study, in its focus on attempts to destabilise the hierarchy in the dynamic between subject and object, does not simply intend to assimilate the inanimate and the animate; to place into the same category subject and object, which is a crude and unhelpful analogy. But it draws attention to the productive and creative forces at play in the unresolved tension between subject and object. In other words, as Jon Erickson puts it, ‘by operating creatively *within* [any split], it is already overcome,’ which suggests that acknowledging and developing a ‘productive’ tension within dichotomies is a positive strategy to deal with the subject and object opposition as a creative force that is not necessarily resolvable (8). The idea is to achieve a dialectic of tension, not of reconciling or resolving that tension. This can be achieved if both sides are acknowledged as entities that are embodied with meanings and values, affecting one another in the performance space.

An investigation of literary works on the intrinsic relationship between human entities and the material world reveals in various ways that a discourse on objects has always been tinged with an unresolved sense of anxiety, particularly in Western thinking. This anxiety is often manifest in problematising, and also radicalising, the blurred subject-object boundary, particularly the idea of the objectification of the subject and the endowing of the object with ‘a certain efficacy.’ The tendency is to regard the world of things as essentially mute, given significance only by persons and their linguistic constructs, while the possibility of an exchange is often denied. A challenge to this tendency is often met with resistance. Igor Kopyatoff argues that one of the historically conditioned predispositions in the West is of conceptually separating people from things, and of seeing people as the natural preserve for individuation, and things as the natural preserve for commoditisation (84). This separation, Kopyatoff explains, is intellectually rooted in classical antiquity and Christianity, which frames the issue of objectification of human attributes within a perennial moral concern in Western thought (84). This stems from the Cartesian system, dominant in Western paradigms of thinking and operation, which entirely rests on the metaphysical dualism of the human soul on one hand, and the corporeal world on another, proposing these two realities as irreducible. In so far as thought, liberty and activity are essential to the world of the thinking being, mechanical determinism and passivity are essential to the world of corporeality. As a result, all reciprocal action between the two substances is excluded in that system: the relationship between spirit and matter has been essentially understood in terms of mutual isolation.

This frame of thought reinforced a culturally instilled and institutionalised split into many levels of Western society and its thinking, and as a result, the material object has become placed in a distant position, approached with scepticism and indifference. The fundamental separation embodies alienation from, and conflict with, nature and different life forms. By extension, it contributes to the marginalisation of the material aspects of performance, and to the separation between the sphere of the subject and modes of objectification; a separation that has been re-examined by some Western critical thinkers as demonstrated below. The fear of fetishisation is another source of anxiety in discourses about objects, which evaded a primary and consistent focus on the object, as Daniel Miller argues in *Material Culture: Why Some Things Matter* (1998). This fear, according to Miller, drives social analysis to move the focus away from object to society 'in their apparent embarrassment at being, as it were, caught gazing at mere objects, that retain the negative consequences of the term "fetishism"' (Miller, *Material Culture: Why* 9).

This attitude commonly stems from a Marxist perspective that sees the object, as commodity, as that which denotes the mystification of human social relationships, when these relationships are expressed as, mediated by, and transformed into, objectified and alienated relationships between things. This is what Marx terms as the 'fetishism' of the commodity, 'which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities' (*Capital: A Critique* 165). Marx arguably finds analogies in religion and idolatry where the productions of the human organism appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own (*Capital: A Critique* 165). This mystical character of the commodity, for him, does not arise from its use-value. As he puts it in a comment on a wooden table, '[t]he form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness' (*Capital: A Critique* 163). 'Fetishism' in the Marxist paradigm, in other words, refers to a symbolic attribution of power to an object that is believed to be intrinsic to it, rather than to human attribution. Seeing objects within that frame of thought feeds into the skepticism evident in the critical and academic discourses about them.[5]

It is argued, for instance, that some artists and practitioners as the ones in some of the case studies presented in this thesis, especially during their creative processes, articulate their attitudes towards objects in terms that can mystify them and endow them with a sense of autonomy in ways that recall Marx's notion of commodity fetishism. In expressing their methods and work philosophies, some artists bestow the object with abilities and characteristics particular to human subjectivities and that conceal the human labour involved in the production of those objects. This is a valid point in principle, however, unlike Marx's example of idolatry, the artists' terms do not stem from a true belief in the objects' power, their 'free will,' or their isolation from the contexts of production and consumption that surround them. The terms tend to be used metaphorically and symbolically as a way of activating a creative process, and of helping others to gain access into it (during rehearsals or workshops, for example). Describing things in 'impossible' terms in those cases is often utilised by artists as an enabling proposition that can play part in liberating creative expression and in opening up perceptions in ways that go beyond rationality, certainties or dichotomies.

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[5] It could be argued that the relationship between people and things cannot be completely objective, inevitably attaining a level of subjective evaluation that go beyond the object's context of production, without necessarily being a form of 'mystification.' As demonstrated in this chapter, the relationship between people and things is complex and multifaceted, taking various forms and implying a multiplicity of meanings and consequences that should not be reduced to either fetishism or its opposite. Thus, Marx's notion of commodity fetishism may entail a degree of generalisation or an exaggeration of people's attitude towards objects, assuming people's inability to distinguish between the characteristics of an object and the characteristics of human subjects. Additionally, the analogy drawn between commodity fetishism and religion could be seen as inaccurate, because commodities are not truly 'worshipped' in a spiritual sense; supernatural powers are not often attributed to them as part of a belief system. And assuming that idols appear to worshippers as autonomous figures endowed with special powers is in itself questionable and unverified, for this could not be said of all worshippers who may approach the idols with varied degrees of conviction.

In the common critical discourse on objects from the perspective of material culture studies, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton in *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (1981) suggest that even when the object is the focus of examination, the tendency to ignore the active contribution of the thing itself to the meaning process is characteristic of modern systems of Western thinking with their reductionist tendencies (as in psychology,[6] structuralism and semiotics). These systems of thought do not emphasise the ability of an object to convey meanings through its own embedded materiality, but they often see it as that which plays a passive role, while meanings tend to be projected from the knowing subject. Things act as catalysts to express thoughts or feelings that are already present in the person's experience. In these views the self is ultimately set apart from its environment, which echoes the Cartesian dualism by seeing that meanings occur because of structures of the mind, not experience; because of form not content (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 43-44).

Within critical discourses on theatre and performance, this marginalisation of the material aspects of performance often takes the form of a persistent focus on text and spoken language as the primary bearers of meaning and significance. Michael Issacharoff in *Discourse as Performance* (1989), for example, bases his analysis of the discourse of performance on the theatre script, especially in the preparatory stage of performance making. His emphasis on text as 'the sole constant element in what goes on in the name of theatre' places it in a position of privilege over other elements of performance (*Discourse* 4). For Issacharoff, a *script* 'should be taken to mean *the place of inscription of virtual performance,*' which underestimates the role of other elements in the creation of meaning, and underlines the separation between the textual and the non-textual in performance analysis (*Discourse* 4).

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[6] Psychoanalytic theories, in various manifestations, used the object not as a material thing, but as a representation and a symbol of the self, charged with psychic energies. An object becomes a projection for the subject's relationships with the other, and for its aspiration towards achieving wholeness in existence. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton argue that psychologists in general, following the lead of Freud and Jung, have ignored the role of concrete objects in the interactions people have with them in an existential context. This leads to an essentially abstract, conceptual view of the role of things in everyday experiences (24-25).

Andrew Sofer in *The Stage Life of Props* (2003) confirms this tendency evident in the attitude towards objects. He argues that '[p]hysical objects have received short shrift in the study of drama. Ever since Aristotle, the analysis of plays has focused on subjects rather than objects, mimesis rather than the material stuff of the stage' (v). He concludes that '[i]n the subject-oriented criticism inaugurated by Aristotle, stage objects either remain at the bottom of the hierarchy of theatrical elements deemed worthy of analysis (script, playwright, actor, director, lighting, design, etc.) or else drop out of critical sight altogether' (v).[7] This attitude, however, was subject to a radical shift in the early twentieth century, which is the point when the concern with the relationship between actor and environment reached an unprecedented extent (Garner 89). For until that moment, what happens when performers and materials interact did not receive a systematic, artistic and critical attention among Western theatre practitioners. However, this impulse was pushed to the point of radically subverting the subject-object hierarchy, which in effect, sustained and emphasised the sense of hierarchy, as demonstrated in the following section.

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[7] Keir Elam in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (1980) declares that until 1931, dramatic poetics had made little progress since its Aristotelian origins. The drama had become (and largely remains) an annexe of literary criticism, while the stage spectacle had been relegated, considered too ephemeral for a systematic study (Elam 5). The year 1931 marks the publication of two studies; Otakar Zich's *Aesthetics of the Art of Drama*, and Jan Mukařovskỳ's 'An Attempted Structural Analysis of the Phenomenon of the Actor.' These two works radically changed the prospects for the scientific analysis of theatre and drama, laying the foundations for the body of works on theatrical and dramatic theory produced by the Prague School structuralists (Elam 5-6).

1.3.1. The Radicalisation of the Subject-Object Relationship in Modernist Thought and Practice

Until the advent of modern Western drama, objects have always played significant parts: the mask in Greek theatre, Mrs. Noah's spinning wheel in *Noah's Flood* from the Chester Mystery Plays, the daggers in *Macbeth*, the skull in *Hamlet*, Prospero's staff, the fans in Restoration comedy; but they primarily functioned within a hierarchical mode of subordination to the actor. As Stanton B. Garner, Jr explains, the objects in those instances served as instruments in a principle of 'belongingness' that is reflected in the term *property* by which they were called. The context of property, as Garner explains, served as the dominant object mode of pre-modern drama. Thus, drama was generally governed by a hierarchy in which a character's efficacy was empowered through the exploitation of the material world (90). Gay McAuley adds that the words *prop* and *property* hint at the functions objects have traditionally filled during that time: as support to the actor and a means of carrying forth certain qualities pertaining to a character, place, or situation. This is one reason, McAuley believes, why modern and contemporary theorists prefer the term *object* to the familiar *prop* or *property*, which bring with them the connotations of former, outmoded practices (175, 176). Jon Erickson suggests that if one considers the etymological character of the word *object* (*ob-jactare*) as a 'thing that is "thrown against" one, then its identification with alienation makes sense.[8] That is, it is a thing not assimilated to the self or not yet placed under its control (*sub-*

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[8] *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1992) suggests that *object* comes from the Latin *obiectum*, '(something) thrown down, (something) presented (to the mind)' (720).

jactare)' (37). This emphasises the independent nature of the *object* as an entity that asserts a presence in itself, as opposed to the passive, yielding *prop*.[9]

The subordination in the use of stage property grew less stable in the subsequent traditions of modernist theatre. From that time, the object was gradually liberated from the former hierarchical systems of illustration and instrumentality, and eventually asserted its presence as an active entity within its spatial surrounding. McAuley explains that the emergence of the object as a major signifying element in theatrical performance dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, with the development of naturalism in European theatre. But it was particularly in the following years, and with the abandonment of illusionistic staging, that the object has come to the fore as at no earlier time (McAuley 169-70). Since then, modernist practices showed a relentless desire to redefine the stage in visual and plastic terms, where theatre artists tried to find new ways of looking at the dynamics between human performer and its surrounding material environment. Mainly driven by a formalising impulse, the rejection of the humanist notion of man as a natural being, and a desire to restore to the stage its material integrity, the human body was eventually presented as something other than itself, in an attempt to transcend the confines of subjective expression. Theatre artists tried to push the human body beyond its limits in order to cross the boundaries of its corporeal realities. Therefore, the human body was shaped and integrated as a formal element among others conceiving it as part of the stage's image and visual field. The theatrical spectacles created at the time by artists such as Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig, and the later works of the Futurists and the Bauhaus theatre, showed a sense that the actor’s body stood against the stage’s formal autonomy through its independent sentience and the various ways by which it registers its living presence. The very body that offered these artists new visual and spatial conceptions also posed a challenge to the aesthetic project of the modernist stage through its insistent qualities as a natural organism. The paradox was that the human form was at the centre of the theatre’s spatial conceptions, but at the same time, with its subjectivity resisted in order to preserve the autonomy of the theatre spectacle.

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[9] In consistently keeping with the proposition of the object as an active entity in itself, the word *object* will be used in this thesis instead of *prop* to describe the physical elements in interaction with the human in the performance space and time. This includes small, hand-held objects, larger movable or static structures and entire environments. This will also be used in conjunction with the word *material* that describes some of the physical elements used in performance or during a creative process, such as paper sheets, corrugated iron, cardboard paper, and so on, which are considered as both physical *objects* and *materials*.

In the work of Adolphe Appia, this is exemplified in his approach to the body of the actor as part of the plastic scenic structure of the stage, but placed above all the other elements (such as space, light and painting). Influenced by Richard Wagner’s music, the presence of the body in Appia’s work intended to express spiritualised and abstract principles. Thus the body, for him, becomes a point of departure of a theatrical work, but with its presence denaturalised in order to become denotative of abstract and rhythmic principles sensitive to the spirit of music (Garner 57). Like Appia, Craig resisted the undisciplined body. But rather than doing so to achieve a fully aestheticised experience, Craig showed an impulse to find ways of regaining artistic control over all aspects of theatre production in order to preserve it as an autonomous art form. He aspired to shift the naturalism inherent in human corporeality into ‘pure’ formal instrumentality, which is manifest in his assertion that ‘[t]he actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure – the Über-marionette we may call him' (85). Craig advocated the mechanised Über-marionette as a replacement for the actor's 'limited' presence.[10]

Craig's ideas on the mechanisation of the performer were highly influential, echoed in later avant-garde practices, as in Futurist theatre, where human actors performed on stage alongside marionette figures. The primary motive was the Futurists' commitment to integrate figures and scenery in one continuous environment (Goldberg, *Performance Art* 22, 24). The drive to bring together 'Man and Machine' was extended in the Bauhaus theatre where performance techniques were implemented to metamorphose the human figure into a mechanical object, as in geometrical dance costumes, masks and stylised movement. Those were created in order to restrict and condition dancers' movements, and to dehumanise actors' bodies, emphasising their 'object' quality and geometrical outlines (Goldberg, *Performance Art* 106-07). These attempts responded to the marginalisation of objects evident in the earlier pre-modern practices by radically reversing it into a privileging of the material qualities of the stage's components. Such interest in the fluid negotiation of the hierarchy of stage elements and the transformability of the theatrical sign is identified in the coinciding structuralist writings on the theatre.

The mobile and transformational capacities of the stage object as a sign-vehicle, is a key question in the Prague school structuralist Jiří Veltruskỳ's pioneering essay 'Man and Object in the Theatre' (1940). Veltruskỳ wrote this essay with the avant-garde theatre in mind, where the presence of the human figure is conditioned by the physical sign-vehicles surrounding it. The essay specifically focuses on theatre’s capacity to break down the conventional opposition between human beings and lifeless objects, switching their semiotic functions. Veltruskỳ argues that ‘the sphere of the live human being and that of the lifeless object are interpenetrated, and no exact limit can be drawn between them’ (86). Thing and man can change places, thus he describes the relation between them in the theatre as ‘a *dialectic antinomy*’ (90), or a dialectic ‘paradox.’ In his emphasis on the active role of the object on stage, he goes as far as arguing that in some instances, the common roles of the actor as ‘lead’ and of the prop as subordinate become reversed; human figures assume a role analogous to that of props, becoming ‘human props’ that are part of the set. He argues that ‘their reality is likewise depressed to the “zero level,” since their constituent signs are limited to the minimum. [...] It follows then that people in these rôles can be replaced by lifeless dummies’ (Veltruskỳ 86).

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[10] The attempt to discipline the performer's corporeality by subverting the subject-object hierarchy is similarly, and openly, pronounced in the writings of French cubist artist Fernand Léger who states that '[t]he object has replaced the subject, abstract art has come as a total liberation, and the human figure can now be considered, not for its sentimental value, but solely for its plastic value' ('How' 155).

The essay’s significance lies in how it aims to destabilise the relationship between the animate and the lifeless as it is habitually perceived in the theatre. It implies, serving the purpose of this study, that the stage object needs to be seen beyond its instrumental function; encouraging an awareness of its embedded performative potentials, which are not wholly under the domination of the subject. The essay reconsiders the active and dynamic reality of the human subject and physical object on stage, ordering the units of sign-vehicles of a play not in terms of their characteristics, but in terms of their contribution to the function of the play, so the role of an object can become more prominent than that of a human performer. The essay opens the way to further considerations of the interaction between subject and object in both theory and practice. On the other hand, reducing the role of the human performer to a mere, passive prop devoid of agency does no less than radically reverse the hierarchical perspective towards the subject-object relationship. Thus the notion of a passive entity (whether in this case it is an object or a human being), or the separation between human form and physical object on stage remains unquestioned. In experiments in modernist theatre such as that of Craig and his successors, Veltruskỳ's notion is taken to its extreme when the human agent is dispensed with altogether and replaced with mechanical figures or pieces of set. In those cases, as Veltruskỳ puts it, '[w]ithout any intervention of the actor, the props shape the action. They are no longer the tools of the actor; we perceive them as spontaneous subjects equivalent to the figure of the actor' (88). A complete inversion of functions between subject and object is attempted with varying, and often contested, degrees of success.

The production and reception of modern works of art, performance and literature are examined in Jon Erickson's *The Fate of the Object: From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art and Poetry* (1995). This work is of special relevance for this study, and it will be referred to at various points throughout the thesis. Erickson in his sophisticated study looks at the question of objectification, focusing on its value in the production of works of art and literature. Objectification, as he uses the term, is similar to the notion of 'defamiliarisation,' or 'ostranenie,' as termed by the Russian formalists, and which will be defined further in Chapter Two. Erickson is concerned to see how this mode of objectification operates for both the subject and the material reality within society, which for him is not a matter of 'essence,' but of socially directed perception (Erickson 22). In the course of his work, Erickson proposes various heuristic methods to re-examine modern artworks as objectified, employing the methodologies of various analyses: historical materialist, phenomenological and deconstructive (Erickson 7).

In a chapter titled ‘The Fate of the Object in the Modern World,’ Erickson reflects on the concentration on the object in early modernism, which he sees was a way of trying to fix the figure of idealised individual spatially against the ravages of time (9). He explains that modernist art engaged in the process of rationalisation that prevailed in the modern world. The separation of the artistic sphere from its relation to the culturally unifying agencies of religious and centralised political power during that phase of Western history had resulted, through the ongoing process of rationalisation, in art’s search for its own ‘essence.’ Therefore, art tried to become ‘autonomous’ and pure of theoretical and moral admixtures (Erickson 13). This was manifest in a will to achieve art’s self-knowledge and the attempt to eliminate all but its most essential features. Erickson argues that each form of art within modernism has engaged in this process, including dance and theatre, and in each, a relentless pursuit for understanding the essence of its formal properties has resulted in a kind of minimalism. Each form of art has reduced itself to its most basic forms of ‘objecthood;’ sound, colour, plastic form, and so on, drawing attention to what gives that form its shape; silence, emptiness, stillness (Erickson 13).

In a reaction to a society that defies certainty and solidity, and in their striving to locate and abstract the essence of their art, many artists during that time evaded human representation as too fragile and ephemeral to sustain itself objectively within the rapid changes induced by a new machine age. Therefore, modern artists created works whose objecthood and survival value depend upon the elimination of representation and of the human. But paradoxically, Erickson argues, that nonhuman object becomes a refuge for the self, a 'materialized projection of inner creative consciousness' (14). The modern desire for the abstract objectification of self emerged from an existential dread of a loss of self, as a result of the positioning of the human being at the edge of an historical void and mass society (14). Objectification and mechanisation, inherent in modernist attempts, thus, can be read as forms of adaptation or alterations of reality. This is seen, for example, in the Futurists' championing of a symbiosis with machines, which can be viewed as a form of 'species adaptation' (Erickson 16).

Since the theatre ultimately depends upon what is human, this posed something of a problem for modernists. Erickson, in another chapter, examines the forms of objectification that take place in modern experimental theatre whose focus is on the body. He argues that

> The theatre finds itself in the position of having to objectify what it is that can be constructed as human, while trying at the same time to either radically reduce or eliminate the distance between the human being and its representation, or else radically increase the distance so that, as with Brecht, representation stands apart from the human being as a transparent process. (54)

On a spectrum of possible representation, he identifies a dehumanising limit, and a humanising limit. Craig's solution is placed on the first extreme by replacing the actor with the Über-marionette, whose nonhuman character and the virtues of silence and obedience provide the only adequate basis for a 'symbol of man' with the capacities of purity and universality. No actor with her or his eccentricities can be such a symbol (Erickson 54). In such forms of theatre that depend upon a certain dehumanisation of the actor in order for their synthesis to be complete, the human body asserts its presence too strongly, not allowing other sensory elements on stage to be viewed with equal attention, relegating them to mere backdrop. This explains the stylised acting, designed as a complementary plastic and not psychological element in constructivist and Bauhaus theatre, and even today in the theatre of Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman (Erickson 56).

The dehumanisation of modernist theatre that found its extreme limit in Craig's proposal aspired to establish the modernist 'pure' and unified object of contemplation. Craig found that the body always at some level 'thinks for itself,' which disrupts the absolute physical and formal control of the mind over the body, therefore he declared that the body of the actor is by nature 'useless as a material for art' (Erickson 58).[11] However, Erickson argues, the problem with this conception is that the human self is not unified in the first place. 'The very nature of human consciousness is its split character, in which the source of consciousness can never be located, and therefore never objectified' (54). This suggests the inevitable failure of Craig's and similar modernists' projects that aimed at the objectification of human attributes to realise ideals of 'purity' and 'universality' on the stage. Craig eventually abandoned the idea of replacing the human actor by the Über-marionette, but instead, he held it as an ideal for the actor; '[t]he marionette as body, the body as exteriorized, disciplined ego' (Erickson 58).

It becomes evident that the work of many modernist artists was based on an investment in objects. Especially the static, or hermetic object attained a special place, for it was seen that it defines itself through difference and resistance to forces of change or alteration, including the altering power of interpretive forces. But then, as Erickson argues, those artists inevitably would find that the static object, while resisting change in some inertial way, has no energy of its own and is swept over by the tides of change (11). He goes on to argue that to compete with the forces of modern life, and to prevent the object's status from being reified, the artists need to maintain a constant and a dynamic tension between the work's 'objecthood' and the possibility of its dissolution or consumption. It is the object's shifting character in each new context of reception that prevents it from being reified, or 'naturalized,' rather than its static muteness (Erickson 11). Some artists negotiated the object's shifting character, or the tension between the work's intrinsic materiality and its dissolution, which prevents it from being reduced into a static object. Tadeusz Kantor, in the second half of the twentieth century, and his extensive body of work in visual art and the theatre, demonstrate an example of such a negotiation.

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[11] Heinrich von Kleist, a hundred years earlier, expressed similar concern as Craig, in his essay 'On the Marionette Theatre' (1810). Kleist argues that the real advantage of the puppet over living performers is that 'it would never be affected' (417). This is because, according to him, the inanimate puppet, unlike the human being, contains an implacable centre of gravity. Affectation appears, he argues, 'when the soul is found at any point other than the movement's center of gravity' (Kleist 417).

The object for Kantor is not a mere 'static' prop that complements the action, nor is it an aesthetic art object, offered for consumption. Rather, the object is integral to the main principle that sees art as that which goes beyond aesthetic stimulation, to revolutionising human awareness. He incorporated objects and environments for their own embedded material characteristics, not for their functions as representational signs. Seeing objects and spaces as creative agents in themselves, he allowed their expressive qualities to take important roles in the dynamics of performance making. He underlined an important role for the object in redefining its relationship to the actor, which in turn revitalises stage action.

Among Kantor's great achievements that distinguished his practice from the earlier modernist attempts, is his emphasis on the role of scenic materiality, articulating a particular sensibility to objects as 'autonomous' entities, without undermining the status of the human within the subject-object relationship. Kantor in his concept of 'object-actor,' which was subsequently named the 'bio-object,' signified a new relationship between the object and the actor; both of them were engaged in a space that created and shaped each of them. Existing on an equal footing with the actor; '[the object] WAS THE ACTOR! The OBJECT-ACTOR!' (Kantor, 'Annexed' 72). The concept of the 'bio-object' constitutes a tension between the actor/character and the characteristics of the object; a relationship identified by an interplay of domination and subjugation between the subject (as Self, the actor, the body) and the object (the Other, the character, the prop) (Kobialka 391).[12] As Kantor puts it, '[w]ithout an actor, the object was a lifeless wreck. On the other hand, the actors were conditioned by those same objects' (qtd. in Kobialka 391).[13]

This physical interplay between the subject and the object can lead to the elimination of psychological representations of characters on stage. For example, in *The Madman and the Nun* (1963), Kantor used a construction of folding chairs, or 'the death machine,' to achieve actors' independence from psychological expression. The use of that construction constricted actors' movements, and eliminated dramatic action on stage. The actors were pushed aside in their struggle with the machine, and the presentation of the text was fragmented by the resulting actions. The emotions that the text demanded were displaced by the emotions of the actors in their fight against the machine and their desire not to be annihilated by it. Consequently, the scenes did not illustrate a plot, but responded to the immediate predicament. This brought the actors into what Kantor called the 'zero zones,' where they were unable to create the illusion of other characters because of their constant desire to escape the machine that was deconstructing the performance space (Kobialka 290). This process of interaction between internal and external forces creates a dynamic of interchange that invests in the productive possibilities intrinsic to the tension between two systems: illusionistic character's representation, and the actors' own 'self.' The presence of the human body along with the object, for Kantor, did not demonstrate an attempt to dehumanise the former or to humanise the latter, their co-presence carried wider connotations that revealed aspects of the human condition.

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[12] This quotation is from the endnote number 17 in Kobliaka's essay, not from the body of the text itself.

[13] The original source of this quotation is an unpublished, undated manuscript by Kantor. Therefore, it is reproduced here as it is quoted in Michal Kobialka's endnote number 17 in *A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944-1990* (1993).

Kantor's extensive body of work in the theatre and visual arts display a deep sense of affinity towards what he considered as 'real' objects; those that are 'WRENCHED FROM THE REALNESS OF LIFE, BEREFT OF THE LIFE FUNCTION THAT VEILED ITS ESSENCE, ITS OBJECTNESS' (Kantor, 'Lesson 1' 210). These are objects stripped from reality; from war and from their function but with the traces of their usage and decay still clinging onto them. A destroyed room, a cart wheel smeared with mud, a decayed wooden board, a kitchen chair, these objects for Kantor stood in opposition to theatre or art objects contributing to the understanding of art as an answer to, rather than a representation of reality (Kobialka 274). An object wrenched from conditions of destruction and from its theatrical and technical usages becomes a 'poor object' that disrupts traditional modes of representation; an object where 'SUBLIME AESTHETIC VALUES ARE REPLACED WITH POVERTY!' (Kantor, 'Lesson 12' 259). A poor object for Kantor is the one that is 'wrenched from Reality, a substitute for an "artistic object"' ('Annexed' 74). It is a fragment of life that has been divorced from it. It ceases to be functional, it is

> the simplest,
> the most primitive,
> old,
> marked by time,
> worn out by the fact of being used,
> POOR. (Kantor, 'Annexed' 74)[14]

Void of their former functions, these objects reveal their own unique presence in the performance space in relationship to other objects and figures. For Kantor, '[t]his condition of being "poor" disclosed the object's deeply hidden objectness. Bereft of its externalities, the object revealed its "essence," its primordial function' ('Annexed' 74). Such discarded, marginalised objects, unmodified by any function imposed on them, reveal their own functions and qualities (or 'essence') when placed in the performance space with the human performer. They cease to function as props, becoming 'the actor's competitor' (Kantor, 'Lesson 1' 212). At that moment, the poor object becomes an active part in the action, acquiring its own historical, philosophical and artistic functions in the performance situation (Kantor, 'Lesson 1' 212). By this, the poor object destabilises conventional systems of signification and challenges habitual viewing experiences that are conditioned by systems of consumption.

Michal Kobialka explains that Kantor's rejection of an artistic object that is controlled by imitation and representation compelled him not only to eliminate the idea of a stage prop, but also to redefine the role of all the material elements in a performance, such as stage design, costume, blocking, lighting and stage action. The rejection of a theatrical object was extended in his rejection of the traditional theatre space. For Kantor, the acting space was not a site neutralised by staging conventions, but a site that produced its own space and its own commentary through its identity and its history. He therefore used ‘real’ places, whose characteristics could not be disregarded (Kobialka 275). The events and characters in a performance become shaped by such spaces and their characteristics, rather than by the characteristics of a traditional theatre auditorium. As Kobialka puts it, ‘[t]heatre ceased to function as a mechanism reproducing the external order of things. Theatre, a real room destroyed by war, was an answer to reality in the same way as Kantor’s poor objects were an answer to artistic objects’ (Kobialka 277).

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[14] All Kantor's quotations are reproduced after his original formatting of them.

1.3.2. The Object in the Theatre, through a Phenomenological Framework

The general aspiration of modernism to achieve claims of the universality of Man, the objectification of the self and the emphasis on the formal technique of a work of art as an end itself, were criticised in later performance and body art practices. The conscious opposition between subject and object inherent in modernist art, reflective of the Cartesian dualist conception of self, has been challenged in the later parts of the twentieth century. As Amelia Jones puts it in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998), ‘I read body art as dissolving the metaphysical idealism and the Cartesian subject (the artist as heroic but disembodied genius, the transcendent “I” behind the work of art) embedded in the conception of modernism hegemonic in Europe and the United States in the postwar period’ (*Body Art* 37). The performative self, whose meaning and significance is not inherent or transcendent, Jones argues, resisted the formalising gaze and dramatically overturned the Cartesian self of modernism, which construes of the body as a brute object or a hollow vessel. The subject-object opposition was questioned, rejecting a view of the body separately from the self, or the body separate from the object, a rejection which is characteristic of phenomenological inquiry (Jones, *Body Art* 39). In phenomenological modes of thinking, the body is lived and intersubjective, both subject and object, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty remarks, 'the sign here does not only convey its significance, it is filled with it' (*Phenomenology* 186).

It was the polarisation of subject and object that motivated twentieth-century's phenomenological critics of Cartesianism, like Martin Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, to challenge the reductive view of the self and other. Merleau-Ponty insists on the fully embodied nature of intersubjectivity, positing the self/other relation as reciprocal in terms of simultaneous subject/objectification (Jones, *Body Art* 40). Especially in his work, there is an emphasis on the manifestation of the world to the body and its senses that is not found in language-based, structuralist theories. The primary concern is with engagement with lived experience, which does not manifest itself as a series of linguistic signs, but as sensory and mental phenomena (Fortier 41). One of the important critical works on theatre and drama that adopts a phenomenological approach, particularly drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty, is Stanton B. Garner, Jr's study *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (1994). It is a critical analysis of Western theatre often linked or compared with Bert O. States' *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (1985); another influential work of theatre analysis. Garner in his work believes that 'drama is historically, formally, and even culturally restricted in its uses of performance, and to varying degrees, imperialistic in its privileging of the written text' (5). He sees that the theatre is laden with issues relevant for phenomenological inquiry, and that has been neglected by other, 'objectivizing,' theoretical approaches. These issues include objects and their appearances; subjectivity and otherness; presence and absence; the body and the world (Garner 3).

Drawing extensively on Merleau-Ponty, Garner is concerned with the spatial conjunctions of human bodies, objects, material environments, and other aspects of performance that constitute its fields of production and reception. Through an investigation of a range of issues, and by referring to, and analysing a diversity of dramatic texts, the author looks at the phenomenological presence of the body, and the corporeal presence of the performer, as simultaneously subject and object, and as the spatialising centre in a performance's material environment. For him '[t]heatrical space is "bodied" in the sense of being comprised of bodies positioned within a perceptual field [...] To stage this body in space before the witness of other bodies is to engage the complex positionality of theatrical watching' (4). Thus for Garner, in a phenomenological sense, the human body is a starting point for constructing a view of the world in general, and for the understanding of theatre and performance in particular, and the objects serve important functions in these frames of understanding, influencing the body's mode of existence in the social world and on stage.

In a chapter titled 'Object, Objectivity, and the Phenomenal Body,' Garner traces the use of the physical object in the twentieth-century's Western theatre. He touches on modernist theatre's deep concern with stage materiality and with the relationship between actor/character and environment, which can be traced through the uses of props during that time (89).[15] He sees that stage objects in general, in all ages, establish points of contact between actor and mise-en-scène, situating the body more firmly within the stage's material environment; a function that cannot be seen without a full consideration of their reciprocal exchange with the human performer. As he puts it,

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[15] Garner often refers to them as 'props,' which is a use of term that I question, as demonstrated above.

> [T]he theatrical function of props extends beyond semiosis to the body's very mode of implantation on stage. Subject to implementation and use, props establish and reinforce the principle of instrumentality, serving as vehicles through which both actor and character operate intentionally in the material sphere. Like language, props extend the body's spatializing capacities and its projective operations. But props differ from language in their materiality, a physicality that links them with body and stage. (89)

Garner's thesis emphasises that theatre objects should be considered no less important as language. They are even privileged over language by their direct, spatio-temporal contact with the human body and with the world, which contributes to the immediacy of their impact. By looking at various examples of Western classical, modernist and contemporary dramatic texts, Garner traces the developments in the uses of objects, demonstrating the instability of the body/object hierarchy and highlighting the various ways by which the interplay of the objective and the corporeal becomes manifest.

However, Garner's reliance on dramatic texts in demonstrating his ideas constitutes a major weakness in his argument. It eliminates the experiential aspect of performance, which is crucial in a phenomenological enquiry on corporeal presences. The bodies and objects that Garner examines are represented in dramatic texts as literary constructs, not as live bodies that existed in time and space and that were observed in live performance context, which does not correspond to the work's intention of critiquing the domination of the written text over material presences. The analysis shifts to the character's body, not to that of the human performer in relation to the materiality of the stage. The importance of Garner's work is undeniable, but it produces 'disembodied writing' (Gross 244), and paradoxically, reverts to reemphasising the written text as the main producer of meanings in the theatre.

An important work of theatre analysis, placed within theoretical and methodological frameworks that cross the bridge between semiotics and phenomenology, and that avoids the domination of text-oriented analysis, is Gay McAuley's *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (1999). Primarily, the work examines the way theatre buildings function to frame the performance event, in addition to the organisation of audiences and practitioners' spaces, the nature of the stage and the modes of representation it facilitates. It also looks at the relationship between the real space of the theatre and the fictional places that are evoked. On the theoretical framing of her book, McAuley asserts that semiotics on one hand has been useful in facilitating the careful description of performance, seen as a montage of signs and as a structure existing in time and space. But semiotics alone tends to reify the performance, to see it as object rather than as a dynamic process. This is countered by the work's phenomenological approach, with its insistence on the receiver and the emitter in a transaction, and its emphasis on the notion of 'lived experience,' which provides vocabulary for the intuitively felt reactions. As for her position as an academic observer in the rehearsal room, McAuley finds commonality with the position of the ethnographer. Thus, the work utilises theoretical and methodological constructs derived from semiotics, phenomenology, ethnography and sociology (McAuley 16-17). This approach responds to the fluidity and complexity of the performance phenomenon, avoiding the reductionism of structuralist theories if applied alone.

McAuley dedicates a chapter to objects in performance, where she considers their multiple functions in modern performance practice. For the author, it is the spatial reality of live performance that enables the object to acquire its expressive force (168). Like Garner, McAuley is concerned with exploring the relationships between space, text, material environment, and other aspects of performance that constitute its fields of production and reception, revealing the importance of the category of space in theatrical meaning making. However, McAuley does not rely on the play text alone, but bases her analysis on observations of live performances and rehearsal processes. In the chapter on objects, she starts by tracing the historical emergence of the stage object as a major signifying element in theatrical performance and in the social world in the modern West. And after looking at the object's peculiar versatility in the theatre and its referential capacity on stage to function as both 'real' and, subject to the theatre's law of denegation, 'not real' (181), McAuley turns her focus to the object in the performance event and in rehearsals. In those contexts, she argues that the object can be used intensively to place words meaningfully within the space, and to make manifest the interpersonal relations in force in a given physical space. By grounding her argument on a case study, which is a comparative staging of Jean Genet's *The Maids* that consists of producing four different versions of the same scene, McAuley proves that major shifts of meaning can be created from the same line of dialogue from one production of a play to another through the negotiation of objects. This means that the same line of dialogue can come to mean radically different things depending on the object the actor has chosen to use and what she/he is doing with it. McAuley's experiment demonstrates the intensive role of the object and its potential strength as a co-author in meaning-making processes in text-based theatre.

McAuley does not focus on the object in isolation, but as part of a system of meaning-making and reception that involves the actor. She makes it clear that the object's expressive and transformational capabilities are introduced through the actor's skills and bodily presence. The human agency is fundamental and it is always present, whether it is the agency of the creator, the user or the spectator. In another perspective, an understanding of things in the material world as endowed with a degree of 'agency' that takes part in activating and mobilising social relations is one of the main questions posed within the field of material culture studies. Through this field, the capacities of the object itself to influence a creative process through its material specificity and efficacy is emphasised, which offers an analytical lens helpful in exploring the relationship between people and objects in a performance process. Certain concepts from material culture studies will be referred to throughout this thesis, particularly in relation to the active role the object plays in mobilising a process of production.

1.3.3. Material Culture Studies and the Question of 'Agency'

Objects play an important role in the social world beyond the context of the theatre. And as McAuley points out, the complex status of objects in contemporary society and the multiple roles they play necessarily affect their expressive functions in the theatre (174). Bridging the gap between the physical and the mental, or between material things and the everyday life and experiences of human beings in the social world, is the focus of the body of work termed 'material culture studies.' It is a field of study that is primarily concerned with issues of objects, things and materiality that surround and relate to the human as a social entity. The field of material culture studies is described by Christopher Tilley in *Handbook of Material*

Culture (2006) as 'a diffuse and relatively uncharted interdisciplinary field of study in which a concept of materiality provides both the starting point and the justification' ('Introduction' 1). It emphasises that the study of the material dimension is as fundamental to the understanding of culture as is the focus on language, social relations, time, space, representations and relations of production, exchange and consumption. It sees materiality as an integral dimension of culture, to the extent that certain aspects of social existence cannot be fully understood without it (Tilley, 'Introduction' 1). Even though its origins lie within archaeology and anthropology, questions of material culture intersect with the concerns of various disciplines in the social and human sciences, pervading as wide a range as cultural anthropology, sociology, economics, architecture, history of art, craft and iconography, technology and museology. Contemporary material culture studies look at materiality as a heterogeneous concept; whether it draws on objects or on the human body itself. Thus their principal concern can be issues of 'things,' or issues of the subject. As Tilley puts it, material culture studies may look at the analysis of,

> things as material matter, as found or made, as static or mobile, rare or ubiquitous, local or exotic, new or old, ordinary or special, small or monumental, traditional or modern, simple or complex. Alternatively, material culture studies may take the human subject or the social as their starting point: the manner in which people think through the medium of different kinds of things. ('Introduction' 4)

The field in its focus attempts to deepen our conception of things not just as dead inert matter that fills a basic utilitarian function, nor as passive markers of social status and cultural difference. It examines the forms, uses and meanings of objects, images and environments in everyday life, particularly focusing on how physical objects take part in the formations of identities, underlining the implication that persons cannot be understood without things; each side takes part in 'making' the other.

Even though studies in material culture do not particularly focus on objects in theatrical contexts, the issues they raise, precisely the emphasis on the dialectical and reciprocal relationship between persons and things, compel a consideration of critical works that stem from material culture perspectives in the context of this thesis. The field transcends the limitations of the theoretical approaches that tend to ignore the reciprocal nature of the exchange between humans and things, and that undermine the instability of the opposition between the subjective and the objective. Its theoretically and disciplinary 'eclectic,' hybrid and unbounded nature corresponds to the fluidity of the performance field. After all, performance touches upon, and is influenced by various aspects of life outside of the theatre.

Scholars of material culture studies have frequently been critical of abstract theoretical approaches that function within linguistic analogies, or that ignore the immediate transactions people have with things. They view things not as static material objects and symbols that reflect pre-existing ideas, but as 'co-producers' of society (Sofaer 2). Joanna Sofaer in *Material Identities* (2007) argues that through the engagement with materials, the symbolic relationship between signified and signifier emerges and shifts. Thus, objects have powers of transformation, shifting understandings of the world and perceived realities, which imply that the line between subject and object is blurred (2). Sofaer suggests that '[i]t is not that the object stands metaphorically for something else but that it is seen *as* the person or the identity' (2). Material culture studies often take as one of their issues of concern the significance of material things as ‘agents,’ themselves active in the creation of social relations; a notion that has polarised critical opinions.

Discourses of material culture often argue that things, in certain conditions, can be or act like persons; they can have personality, intention, causation, and transformation; they can show volition, have social lives and embody biographies, thus have ‘agency’ (Hoskins 81-82). This implies the ways in which things are invested with personality and have impact. They stimulate emotional responses and are invested with some of the intentionality of their creators, thus they are produced as ways of distributing elements of the subjects’ efficacy. It also suggests the ways in which things actively constitute new social contexts (Hoskins 75-76). The proposition that things can be said to have social lives is developed in the influential collection of essays *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives* (1986) edited by Arjun Appadurai. In an essay from that collection titled ‘The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,’ Igor Kopytoff uses the term ‘cultural biography’ to refer to the way a thing can acquire and shed value in different circumstances. He demonstrates how in tracing the biography of a thing, one may ask questions similar to those asked about people. Some of those questions would be ‘[w]here does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized “ages” or periods in the thing’s “life,” and what are the cultural markers for them?’ and so on. He argues that the cultural responses to such biographical details reveal a variety of values and convictions that shape our attitudes to objects (66-67). As suggested from the poem at the chapter’s opening, Brecht, who was fully aware of the connection between an object and the lifestyle it presupposes, would have confirmed Kopyatoff's notion of the 'cultural biography' of things. It was this awareness that led Brecht and the actors of the Berliner Ensemble to take such pains to select appropriate objects to work with, preferring things marked by reality and history (McAuley 181-82).

Another way of looking at the agency of things in everyday life is articulated by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton who examine household material possessions in contemporary urban life and the ways people carve meaning out of their surrounding domestic environment. The authors try to show how man-made objects also make and use their makers and users. They emphasise in their book the important role objects play in human affairs, and their capacity to alter the pattern of life and shape personal identities, a role, they argue, that has seldom been investigated by philosophers and social scientists (15). As they put it, '[o]ne of the most important, but unfortunately most neglected, aspects of the meaning of things is precisely the ability of an object to convey meaning through its own inherent qualities. Yet most accounts of how things signify tend to ignore the active contribution of the thing itself to the meaning process' (43). Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton stress how things have socialising functions; they are able to reveal social goals and expectations through their use, serving as 'role models' for social subjects, a concept that they borrow from George Herbert Mead (50-51).

The issue of the agency of the object is pushed further in social anthropologist Alfred Gell's often cited, influential work *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (1998). In his book, described as 'idiosyncratic and uncompromising' (Dussart 939), Gell rejects the aesthetic and semiotic criteria of reading the art object. He sees that aesthetic theories take an overwhelmingly passive perspective on the art object, while things are made as a means of influencing the thoughts and actions of others. Thus he puts forward a theory of the 'agency' of the art object that could be applied to all forms of material culture. In this theory, things are made as a form of instrumental action, arguing that art works are like people in terms of being social agents. Gell constructs the anthropology of art as a theory of agency of material entities that motivate inferences, responses or interpretations (Thomas ix). According to this theory, material objects in their capacities to act upon the world and upon persons, embody intentionalities and mediate social agency. Like most contemporary material culture theorists, Gell rejects the linguistic analogies of semiotic theories that have been mobilised by many theories of art, insisting that art is a system of social action; it is about doing and agency, not only being a matter of meaning and communication as in much thinking about the art. In his words,

> In place of symbolic communication, I place all the emphasis on *agency*, *intention*, *causation*, *result*, and *transformation*. I view art as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it. The 'action'-centered approach to art is inherently more anthropological than the alternative semiotic approach because it is preoccupied with the practical mediatory role of art objects in the social process, rather than with the interpretation of objects 'as if' they were text. (6)

Gell's work proposes an active model of an object's biography, in which the object may interact with the people who gaze upon it, use it and try to possess it (Hoskins 76). It is worth noting that Gell acknowledges that art objects are not 'self-sufficient' agents. He is more concerned with objects as 'secondary' agents differentiated from the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the human agent (17). The object for him is a 'manifestation of agency' (20), which is an idea that will be demonstrated below in examples from contemporary works of visual art. Gell explains that his description of artefacts as 'social agents' is not merely an attempt to formulate a form of material culture mysticism, but to demonstrate that ‘objectification in artefact-form is how social agency manifests and realizes itself, via the proliferation of fragments of “primary” intentional agents in their “secondary” artefactual forms’ (21). It is a relational and context-dependent concept. Nicholas Thomas explains in his Foreword to Gell’s book that the author, in his interest in addressing the workings of art through anthropology, proposed that it is possible to address questions of the efficacy of the art object without succumbing to the fascination and aura of those objects (viii). Thomas explains that Gell’s claims are not to suggest that in some sense the object *makes* things by itself, independently of a field of expectations and understandings. It is a question of seeing the object within the context of its creation and circulation; within the networks of intentionalities in which it is enmeshed, as will be demonstrated in the examples below.

Gell’s radical work in *Art and Agency* is a thought-provoking theoretical contribution to the studies of art objects as well as the anthropology of art, but it is not easily comprehended nor is it fully coherent, which is partially due to the unedited and unrevised form in which the book was published after the author’s death, and with the lack of an introduction that would have paved the way for his argument. This suggests that the work would have been potentially modified if its author had lived longer. Generally, Gell’s theoretical positioning is not strongly linked to the case studies that he analyses. Most importantly, the theoretical basis for the notion of an agentive object, or seeing art as a mode of action, which is in itself a valuable notion to consider for the study of objects, is not clearly explained or justified in the examples that Gell provides. It has been recently argued that Gell’s theory diverts attention away from human agency by attributing agency to the objects themselves, which is seen as ‘a case of an analogy gone too far’ (Morphy 6). Additionally, the very properties of art that Gell excludes from his definition and analysis of art objects (aesthetics and semantics) are seen as integral to understanding art works and their impact on people (Morphy 5). Their exclusion in Gell’s thesis has been considered as a simplification of the role of those theories in the understanding of works of art.

Also in describing and commenting on some art objects from non-Western cultures, Gell makes generalised remarks that do not consider the aesthetic and cultural specificities of those objects, and that at times, assume a universal viewer who views the objects in the same way as himself. For example, writing on Iatmul lime-containers he comments, ‘[e]xamining this gourd container, we are able to see that it is decorated with beautiful patterns, formed from motifs that do not obviously resemble real-world objects. The gourd’s decoration is a free exercise in the deployment of curves, ovals, and spirals and circles, in symmetrical or repetitive arrangements’ (74). In other discussions of artefacts from non-Western cultures, Gell suggests narrow definitions of aesthetic experiences in relation to those objects. Howard Morphy concludes his critique of Gell’s book by arguing that,

> In pushing agency beyond the limits of its meaning [Gell] is in danger of creating another of those fuzzy concepts that, while directing the attention of anthropologists to an important dimension of the phenomena under consideration – in this case recognizing art as a means of acting in the world – reaches a conclusion by avoiding the analysis that is necessary to demonstrate the argument. By attributing agency to the objects themselves Gell deflects the focus of the anthropology of art away from the many ways in which art contributes to social action and the production of identity. (22)

Yet, in spite of the problematic manner in which Gell introduces the notion of agency, and in spite of the reductive views of some of the concepts that he refers to, the book is rich with insights and suggestive analyses of cases that highlight the centrality of the art object, as Morphy himself acknowledges. Viewing art as a system of action, and the object as agent within this system rather than as encoding symbolic propositions about the world, which is the main thrust of his argument, is a positive analogy in discourses on material objects. Janet Hoskins remarks that this provocative comparison between the efficacy of persons and of things in Gell's work implies that we need to pay more attention to the phenomenological dimension of our interactions with the material world. Thus the main point to underline here, as Bjørnar Olsen puts it, is to avoid linguistic and material idealism, and rather 'to become sensitive to the ways things *articulate themselves* – and to our own somatic competence of listening to, and responding to, their call' (98). Indeed, the notion of endowing the object with agency can be seen as radical and threatening to human agency, but seeing that agency in terms of an enabling creative force in a work process, or as the ability of objects to affect change in the human user or viewer contains productive implications in performance practice. It invites an interpretation of the notion of agency that places it on a level slightly different from common projections of what the notion may entail, as will be demonstrated further in the following examples.

1.3.3.1. Examples of Works of Art Created as an Experiential Dialogue: The Object's Capacity to Affect Change in the Viewing Experience

Performance and visual art practices in the last two centuries are laden with examples of objects and art works that invite active engagements and that are constructed as experiential dialogues between objects and spectators, each affecting change in the other. Reminiscent of aspects from Gell's proposal, these artworks assert their functions as material manifestations of social agency and as activators of people's action. Gell argues that an agent is one 'who causes events to happen in their vicinity. […] An agent is the source, the origin, of causal events' (16). This can be applied to the art objects that acquire a degree of 'secondary agency' that is embedded in a network of social relationships grounded on the human agency (Gell 17). These experiments often take the art object off the pedestal and into the realm of the everyday so that it becomes a site of social activity, which marks a move towards de-privileging the authority of the single creator. Rather than asserting the artist's creative autonomy or the art object's self-containment, some of these approaches create sculptural interventions into the exhibition space, provoking responses from the spectators or even guiding their movement. 'Reading' the work turns into an interactive process that is often communal, demanding bodily negotiations. American sculptor Robert Morris was concerned in his work with increasing the viewer's awareness of spatial relationships within real space and real time. For him, the art object is an event: 'It was a confrontation with the body. It was the notion that the object recedes in its self-importance. It participates in a complex experience that includes the object, your body, the space, and the time of your experience. It's locked together in these things' (qtd. in Kaye, *Site-Specific* 27).

In 1971, Morris created an installation that consisted of a series of sculptural objects that aimed to test the relationship between the body of the spectator and the object on display, thus materialising the notion of the object as a multi-dimensional social experience. The work's participatory activities ranged from the interaction with isolated objects to engaging with large-scale structures and physical obstacles.

For Morris it was 'an opportunity for people to involve themselves with the work, become aware of their own bodies, gravity, effort, fatigue, their bodies under different conditions' (*The Long Weekend* 6). His intention was to challenge the conventional passive gallery-viewing experience by providing situations for spectators to become more aware of themselves and their own experiences rather than a version of the artist's experience (*The Long Weekend* 6).[16] In this kind of work, which was similarly created by others as a dialogue between visual artists and dancers from the 1960s and 70s, the performance situation becomes a continuous, open dialogue that lacks hierarchy or discrimination; any part of the exchange can claim a point of departure and an impulse for the creative process. In those instances, the ideas of a disinterested spectator, a marginal object, and the artist as a superior author are challenged; empowering audiences, and giving roles to objects and spaces as co-authors of a work of art.

Gell's model of the art object's agency refers to the object's capacity to actively interact with the viewers who gaze upon it, causing transformations in their physical and psychological dispositions. This mode of agency, needless to mention, occurs in conjunction, and as a reflection of its maker's agency. This can be demonstrated in experiments from contemporary visual art, as in the work of Mona Hatoum, a London/Berlin-based visual artist of Palestinian origin. Hatoum created a body of work that forces the viewer to engage with an object and its materiality, prompting both physical and sensory experiences. Central to her oeuvre is an economy of materiality and spatiality manifest in installations and sculptures permeated with the tension of oppositional experiences: charm and revulsion; safety and fear; security and threat, thereby invoking viewing encounters with objects that are at once implicating and challenging. The artist's body of work employs the intrinsic qualities of materials, often appropriated from the local culture, to subvert an object's familiar function within the space of the exhibition. As she puts it, 'I want the meaning to be embedded, so to speak, in the material that I'm using. I choose the material as an extension of the concept, or sometimes in opposition to it, to create a contradictory and paradoxical situation of attraction/ repulsion, fascination and revulsion' ('Mona Hatoum' 31). Hatoum's objects often convey seeming innocence and security that are transformed into an alarming disclosure upon close examination. The change in the viewer's physical distance to the work, therefore, signifies a shift in perception as well as comprehension, forcing her/him to question the reality of the human condition within the personal as well as the current socio-political context. Her aim is to give the work 'a strong formal presence, and through the physical experience to activate a psychological and emotional response. […] I want to create a situation where reality itself becomes a questionable point. Where viewers have to reassess their assumptions and their relationship to things around them' ('Mona Hatoum' 24).

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[16] First exhibited at the Tate Gallery in 1971 as its first ever participatory exhibition (*Move*), this piece was recreated at Tate Modern in London in May 2009 under the title *Bodymotionspacethings*, which was part of *The Long Weekend: 'Do it Yourself'* programme. Interacting with the objects and structures on display (balancing on a flat board placed on half a sphere, climbing a steep ramp with the aid of ropes, sliding on another ramp, or walking inside a large rolling tube) dissolved the separation between body and environment, exemplifying Merleau-Ponty's fundamental argument that 'I have a body, and that through that body I am at grips with the world' (*Phenomenology* 353). Participants' engagements were playful, and their movements were evidently challenged, controlled and sometimes defeated by the structures. The physical environment came to life as spectators interacted with it, and the space of Tate Modern's Turbine Hall became charged with the actions of all parts of the exchange: the objects, the environment and the spectators.

Still Life (2008), upon first glance, shows colourful ceramic shapes resembling a selection of fruits. Only upon closer inspection does the viewer become aware of the strong visual resemblance to hand-grenades. The colorful objects are crafted in the shapes of different types of grenades, such as those referred to as ‘pomegranate,’ ‘ball,’ ‘egg,’ ‘lemon’ and ‘pineapple.’ Disguised as delicate and appealing decorative objects, the grenades invert their conventional associations with war and destruction (Mikdadi). Hatoum also created a series of installations that use metal grills and grids as their basis. In *The Light at the End* (1989), the artist arranges electric heating rods attached to a metal frame placed in a dark corner at the far end of a room, which overlays the installation with a double spatial metaphor: that of protection or imprisonment. From a distance, the material’s orange, red and yellow hues, in contrast to the darkness of the space, are seductively alluring, attracting the viewer closer only to be repelled by the material’s threatening heat; the warmth of the colours transforms into the implications of torture, pain and incarceration (Hatoum, Interview; Mikdadi). In this way, Hatoum interrogates the language and the inherent characteristics of the material by endowing it with socio-political relevance beyond the viewers’ immediate experiences of the work. In *The Light at the End*, the multiple and shifting meanings in the warm colours and the metal structure suggest the appeal of the ‘home,’ which may link to Hatoum’s experience of living in exile, addressing the violent character and the instability of the idea of separation. The paradox of experiences embodied in the work is emphasised in its title, which ironically subverts the reassurance implied in the phrase and disrupts the viewers’ expectations; what they encounter at the end of a ‘tunnel’ is not light, but danger.

Interior Landscape (2008) is another of Hatoum’s installations that negotiates the distinct characteristics of the physical material and its impact on the viewer in relation to the work’s wider socio-political implications. The work was first created for Darat Al Funun in Jordan to be later displayed in 2010 as part of *The New Décor* group exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London. In this installation, Hatoum transformed the wire support of a bed into a grid of barbed wire (a common material in many of her installations). Set in an alcove, the bed, without its mattress and with its chipped paint, resembles a prison bed. The function of the domestic piece of furniture as a symbol of comfort and repose is subverted into a repellant and disquieting object. In stark contrast to the bed's barbed wire base, Hatoum placed a soft pillow onto which thin threads of hair are scattered, hardly visible. The sight of the stray hairs from a distance is repulsive, however, a closer inspection reveals a map of Palestine sown on the pillow using the artist's own hair. The ghostly map seems like a faint echo of a disappearing dream. The map of Palestine is repeated on the wall, made from a wire clothes hanger hanging like a lifeless silhouette. Next to it, a basket-like paper bag cut out from a printed map of Palestine is suspended. A small coffee table stands against the wall, unsteady in its support of a thin paper plate on which the artist has drawn map-like shapes by tracing the outline of oil stains.

The bedroom normally associated with peace and tranquility is turned into a discordant space filled with tensions, fragility and uncertainties. None of the objects are functional or reliable: a bed with a torturous surface; a broken table; a useless hanger. Together, the objects create a disconcerting surrealist landscape. The harshness of the stark white walls of the gallery and the bright white lighting of the room enhance the uneasiness by which the installation confronts the spectator; all of the objects are clear and strongly vivid in spite of their vulnerability. The installation serves as a metaphor of the state of being for Palestinian people living the reality of an ongoing conflict. Portraying the contradictions found in Palestine; the work 'imagines the conflict between the dreams and aspirations of a Palestinian individual juxtaposed with the harsh reality they have to face' (Haupt and Binder). In this piece, as in others, Hatoum creates a domestic space that subtly transgresses the conventional functions of domesticity, turning it into an inhospitable space of discomfort and insecurity. 'Home' reappears as an ambiguous construct; alluring but dangerous and restless. The work challenges the viewers' expectations, forcing them to alter their position both physically, in relation to the work in the gallery space, and mentally and emotionally, in relation to the works' wider implications.

The object's 'agency' in those works is embedded in the material characteristics of the object itself and in its seeming normality, which take central role in activating the viewers' interaction, agitating them to ask questions. Hatoum's style, according to art curator Salwa Mikdadi, is distinguished by 'the phenomenological perception that conveys simultaneous feelings of perceived normalcy and impending danger, keeping the viewer's psyche in constant flux. As a result, the visitor's senses are heightened, left in a state of instability while also attuned to their own physical presence' (Mikdadi). For Hatoum, engaging the viewer in a physical and a visceral process takes precedence over the intellectual. It is to 'implicate the viewer in a phenomenological situation in which the experience is more physical and direct. I wanted the visual aspect of the work to engage the viewer in a physical, sensual, maybe even emotional way; the associations and search for meaning come after that' ('Mona Hatoum' 23).

The disorienting effect caused by the object, and evoked by the tension between everyday familiarity and its subversion, is at the heart *Seizure* (2008), a site-specific sculpture by British artist Roger Hiorns that focuses on the natural action of the material itself rather than on its function as a metaphor. Unlike Hatoum's work, the line between the authorship of the artist and that of the artwork is blurred, foregrounding the role of the material in creating the work of art and in activating the viewers' responses. Hiorns transformed a flat in a dilapidated social housing block in London. A few months before the building is demolished, the artist filled the flat with resplendent blue crystals. Hiorns, who is known for working with unusual materials that cause strange transformations on found objects and urban situations, pumped copper sulphate solution into the flat, where it covered the walls, ceiling and all the bathroom fittings. The solution was then left for several weeks, before any excess liquid was removed and the crystal growth revealed. Eliza Williams describes the final result as 'strangely natural, as if discovering an ancient, glittering cave. Despite its allure, the installation is sharp and potentially dangerous, however, with all visitors having to don boots and gloves before entering' (Williams). The familiar domestic set up of a home became strange and unsettling with the alien material growth covering its surfaces. The nature of the material of the art object itself made physical demands on the spectators who had to wear protective clothing before being confronted by it. A spectator comments on how the consciously imposed alteration in appearance at the beginning of the experience 'stimulated an excitement - a mystery, it created an interactive dimension' (Sireita). The immediacy of the installation and its material, more than the artist, dictated the conditions of its relationship to the audience. The crushing of the crystals, the footprints left by passers-by that later became filled with blue-coloured water and hardened by time, affected the viewing experience. Spectators tried to manoeuvre their way around holes, mounds and excesses laying on the ground or hanging from surfaces like traps. The crystalline accretions, for *The Guardian*'s art critic Adrian Searle, were 'both fascinating and repellent; all this inorganic growth is alien and alienating, an invasion indifferent to life but also somehow like it' (Searle).

The visceral effect of the installation is reminiscent of Hatoum's objects on a certain level. In this case, however, the shape of the sculpture was not fully predetermined by the artist; both the material itself and the spectators took direct part in determining the work's formation and the process of its disintegration. In addition to their marks and footsteps that corrupted the purity of the crystallisation, many visitors have claimed the artwork for themselves, literally grabbing pieces of crystal to take away as souvenirs. Several viewers filmed the inside of the space and published their short videos on the web. Hiorns expected this kind of response from the viewers as part of the work's life cycle, declaring that '[t]he people who come to visit the work are fundamentally the people who are destroying it' (qtd. in Patrick), thus the material's life is a dialogue exchanged with the people interacting with it. The authority of Hiorns as the work's creator is questioned, and the power of the artwork—along with its viewers—as authors is emphasised. The artist initiated the work, chose the material, used it to cover the flat's walls and surfaces, anticipated a kind of a chemical reaction and waited for a somewhat uncontrollable result.[17] The material, its inherent nature and the audiences' responses largely mobilised and controlled the process. This is not to undermine Hiorns's agency, but it is to destabilise the autonomous figure of the artist as creator, and to question the nature of the artwork as self-contained. Hiorns himself underlines such understanding of 'authorship' by declaring that the work 'comes from an impetus to take myself out of the equation […] You write yourself out of your own history. This thing didn't necessarily have an author. […] The artist wants to put himself to the front, I want to make myself disappear' (qtd. in Patrick). In his work, Hiorns looks for a material that could make its own aesthetic, 'basically to stop me from making my own aesthetic. I get to become an objective viewer of my own process' (Hiorns, *Turner*). After setting up the conditions for the work process and for the object to become alive, the artist steps back and the actual reference for the art object shifts, giving space for the object to 'speak' for itself. Hiorns in *Seizure* was not interested in creating an experience of detached metaphorical reflection of a static object, as in conventional museum or gallery displays. The 'life' of the artwork is of significant importance in that process, understood as more than the life it might have within the display of an art institution (Hiorns, *Turner*). The work created an unfamiliar social space shared between people and the material, which is an experience that started from the moment of wearing the special clothing that marked a memorable transformation of the everyday.

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[17] Hiorns declares that after pouring the boiling liquid into the space he waited to see what would happen and what kind of aesthetic he would gain. He was aware that the corruption of the material as a reaction to its contact with the materials already in the flat was a possibility, potentially ending up with something like a grey or a brown mass instead of the pure blue crystallisation that was 'more than what we probably assumed that we would get' (Hiorns, *Seizure*).

1.3.4. 'Listening' to Physical Objects

In the sculptural investigations in the above examples, the art object and its inherent materiality are endowed with a certain degree of 'secondary agency,' as in Gell's terms, which is not divorced from the agency of the human subject who is the work's initiator and observer. Peter Schwenger, in *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (2006), responds to the contested idea of the agentive object in relation to the subject without falling into the problems of reductions and generalisations found in Gell’s study. The metaphor of listening to the ‘call of the objects’ used by Olsen, and demonstrated in the artworks above, touches on Schwenger’s attitude in his collection of essays and examples from works of art and literature. It is one of the key texts that will be mentioned recurrently at several points throughout this thesis, for it touches on several issues that are highly pertinent to this study. These include the object as a generator of narrative; the narrative of the collection; the materiality of words; and the object as an active contributor to meaning making. Therefore, Schwenger’s book is presented here at some length, highlighting the relevant parts that are employed in the subsequent discussions.

Itself a complex and sophisticated work that does not claim to be exhaustive or complete, the book lucidly analyses why human beings surround themselves with things, and how this can be a cause and a result of melancholy. It carefully explores various examples of works of art, while also leaving space for readers’ reflection. Although it does not touch on live performance, the work makes an important contribution to studies of objects and materiality in relation to human subjectivity, particularly demonstrating ways in which the notion of agency of objects manifests itself. Using as examples works of literature, poetry, painting, sculpture, art objects, collecting, visual images and illustration, Schwenger offers a series of poetic meditations on the idea of melancholy implicit in the relationship between subject and object. By referring to various modes of artistic representation from the modern and postmodern periods, the author looks at our state of being and sense of self in connection with material things, with specific interest in the relationships between narrative and debris; definition and hallucination; possession and loss; connections that inform the structure of the book. Drawing on psychoanalysis and phenomenological theories, Schwenger touches on the subject's dynamic with the object, seeing it as part of a mechanism of dealing with the idea of 'loss,' whether explicitly or implicitly.

The central premise of Schwenger's writings is to challenge the conventional opposition between subject and object, and the hierarchical approaches inherent in common discourses on the art object. In a provocative and committed outlook towards material things—reminiscent of the attitudes of thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin and even Alfred Gell—Schwenger restores to objects a sense of action and importance, often lost in processes of representation, reception and interpretation. Referred to as 'anecdotal,' 'biographical,' 'melancholic,' 'gazing,' objects never appear passive in Schwenger's analyses; they always exude a powerful and vital existence and an active presence that is not undermined by a dominant subject. For Schwenger, the object does not only become a vehicle for humans' emotional investment, which can be seen as the impulse behind certain acts like collecting and possessing. The object claims an active presence in various manifestations and in different situations.

In a chapter titled 'Words and the Murder of the Thing,' Schwenger, echoing Heidegger, differentiates between an object and a 'thing.' He suggests that an object is understood primarily as a representation, seen entirely in relation to our experience of it as subjects, while the 'thing' needs to be seen in terms of its independent mode of being. As he puts it, '[a]ll of our knowledge of the object is only knowledge of its modes or representation—or rather of *our* modes of representation, the ways in which we set forth the object to the understanding, of which language is one' (22-23). The presence and function of 'things,' to him, go beyond signifying internal workings of the human psychic space. This stems from Heidegger's privileging of the thing over the object, seeing the former as 'self-sustained, something that stands on its own' ('Thing' 166); something that calls for us to see it as it is, as open and revealing in itself. On the other hand, an object is to be understood primarily in relation to our experience as subjects (Cerbone 132); as a thing approached in terms of representation, an idea that he rejects. Instead, Heidegger proposes seeing the thing in terms of its own 'self-supporting,' independent mode of being; in his own words: 'the thingly character of the thing does not consist in its being a represented object, nor can it be defined in any way in terms of the objectness, the over-againstness, of the object' ('Thing' 167).[18]

Similarly, Schwenger argues that objects are representations of things, and our separation from the thing, which the object attempts to heal, is a cause of melancholy; a key idea in his book. He therefore expresses a need to release the thing from the objectifying control of the subject, thus rearticulating our relationship to things and to the world. This idea is further explained in another chapter titled 'Painting and the Gaze of the Object,' where he asserts,

> The thing can be thought of as the object with the screen removed. In the absence of the screen, all that made the physical thing into the object of a subject is stripped away. The thing appears in all its

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[18] According to Heidegger, the object is what something is reduced to under the faculties of representation. Heidegger suggests that the 'thingness of things' remains remote from us as long as we conceive of things as *objects*. That is, the essence of thingness does not appear in 'objective' scientific accounts of an entity's physical composition, or in modes of framing which equate things merely with their utility as man-made products. The 'Thing-in-itself' means 'an object that is no object for us, because it is supposed to stand, stay put, without a possible before: for the human representational act that encounters it' (Heidegger, 'The Thing' 177). Instead of seeing things as static objects that are represented within human consciousness, Heidegger proposes that we contemplate all things as instances of 'gathering'—as clearings that enable a bringing together of four modes of being—earth, sky, mortals (human beings), and the divine—that mutually appropriate each other (Economides).

> strangeness, ineluctably itself, other than us, existing in a way that must baffle our comprehension. This has not been the case with the object, which is attached to the subject by a sightline, as a boat is moored to the shore. (47)

Heidegger and Schwenger's views imply the need to see the object as correlative to the subject not as its opposite; 'but utterly other' (Schwenger 47). This attitude emphasises the object's release from the dynamics of the subject's controlling gaze, returning it back into a 'thing.' The 'gaze of the object' is a way of expressing the object's agency. Here Schwenger, using one of Lacan's notions, challenges the view of objects as merely the passive recipients of looking. By examining paintings and their modes of reception, Schwenger argues that 'in a reversal of the common view of vision, it is objects that look at us' (35). In the interchange between the human subject and a work of art, the 'gaze of the object' does not represent that of the subject. According to Schwenger, the latter is dissolved and annihilated, and the object disappears as 'object.' What remain thus are two entities, or 'unknowables' as Schwenger describes them (48), both in a state of 'thingness.' The result is a reciprocal relationship between a thing and an 'other.'[19]

In later chapters 'Still Life: A User's Manual' and 'The Dream Narratives of Debris,' objects are given significance as agents in the construction of narrative. In the former chapter, Schwenger examines how the stillness of still life compositions in works of art is capable of generating narrative motion (103). The silent object in that case is not necessarily conditioned by the narrative; it becomes a text in itself that evokes events, stories and reflections. The accumulating experiences and associations in the things bring them to the forefront as bearers of narratives, ‘which emanate from them like an aura’ (Schwenger 109). He concludes this chapter by asserting that ‘[s]till life [...] can generate narrative, be bound up with narrative. Yet in the end, at its moment of ending, every narrative is stilled in a kind of objecthood. The line between still life and narrative thus traces a full circle, a circle that may also be a zero’ (115).

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[19] Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) proposes a similar argument on the reciprocal exchange of gazes between subject and object. Also drawing on Lacan's psychic economy, Phelan argues that in looking at the other (whether animate or inanimate) the subject seeks to see itself. Seeing thus is 'an *exchange* of gazes between a mirror (the image seen which reflects the looker looking) and a screen (the laws of the Symbolic which define subject and object positions within language). Looking, then, both obscures and reveals the looker' (Phelan, *Unmarked* 16). Therefore, Phelan explains, it is not accurate to speak of 'the gaze(r)' exclusively; the looker is always also regarded by the image seen, and her/his position as the one who looks is discovered and reaffirmed through this regard (*Unmarked* 15). I will return to this proposition by Phelan in Chapter Four.

The idea of narrative as that which emerges out of material things and that subsequently returns back to a state of materiality is extended in ‘The Dream Narratives of Debris.’ There, Schwenger sees the collectors’ activity as fundamentally narrative, yet it is a journey of collecting that never concludes with a coherent narrative. Thus, in a manner that can be linked to Benjamin’s conception of the process of writing, Schwenger in this chapter explores the ways that narrative can be composed out of debris and fall back into it. Benjamin in his rejection of the instrumentality of language and in his critique of its reduction to a representational tool, tried to find ways of recovering an ‘authentic’ way of dealing with the past that does not entail direct representations of it. Benjamin proposed a disconnected way of writing; tearing fragments out of their original contexts and recontextualising them in new configurations as alienated presences; as strange, uncanny experiences that would invite new ways of seeing. This applies to textual fragmentations, or quotations in writing, which are central to Benjamin’s work, and which are discussed further in Chapter Five.

Fragmentation breaks the texts loose from their use value and their typical functions within narrative construction, turning them into ‘found’ materials, like objects in a collection. This form of textual montage and the correlation between writing and collecting is identified in Schwenger’s ideas. In ‘The Dream Narratives of Debris,’ he looks at instances where random physical objects, or debris, elicit narrative pattern or attach themselves to an already existing one in a process that he sees homologous to the principles of dream construction (144, 150). Joseph Cornell’s boxes of assembled objects are one of those instances that Schwenger draws upon. In those boxes, Schwenger argues, the arrangement of found objects mimics the processes by which dreams and narratives are assembled, blurring the line between them (145). In these moments, narrative elements themselves are fragmented, like a bricolage or ‘bric-a-brac,’ not necessarily offering a linear stream of ideas or a logical sense of progression. The narrative itself becomes objectified; an idea that I will examine closely in the following chapters in the context of performance.

Through Schwenger’s collection of writings and reflections transpires a fundamental understanding of objectivity as a state not exclusive to material things, but that extends to include the human subject and her/his artistic and cultural products such as words and narratives. Through the interaction with physical objects, whether in processes of creation or consumption (by making the art object, viewing it, or possessing it), the boundary between the subject and the object blurs and sometimes dissolves, merging one into the other. Schwenger disrupts our perceptions of objects and systems of meaning and highlights the unresolved senses of loss and separation inherent in our relationship to things. He invites new ways of looking at the object and our relationship to it; ways that can invoke instability and anxiety, but also a sense of new possibilities. His is an open-ended project that acknowledges its own limitations and incompleteness. For Schwenger believes that the problem of objects has wide-ranging implications that cannot be fully contained in one study, which is in itself a source of melancholy.

A line can be traced through the various literatures and scholarly works discussed above, which moves from a one-sided view of the object, into a more complex reconsideration of the subject-object opposition as a source of productive exchange. The works introduce a range of methods and approaches for studying objects that exist in the sphere of the human being, showing that the interest in them is evident across many disciplines and frames of thought. The disciplines are diverse, but they share a concern with objects and their material properties, as well as a rejection of the colonisation of the object by the subject, which are notions embedded in the ideologies and the methods of the practices in the following case studies. The above works also show that the relationship between humans and objects is multiple, ambiguous and open to constant change, an idea that I will return to in the conclusion.

1.4. Methodology and Case Studies

As articulated so far, this study is fundamentally concerned with the shared experience between the physical object and the human subject in the context of performance practice. My aim is not to focus on either side of that experience, but to focus on the relationship itself in the frame of performance. Through this dynamic, the thesis draws attention to the ‘efficacy’ of the object and its capacity to generate responses, action and evoke meanings within a creative framework. As expressed in various ways in the literature touched upon above, the object is examined for its potential to influence the process of meaning making through its own physical specificity. It is not seen as passive and inanimate, but as an active ‘partner’ in the exchange. At the same time, the thesis does not attempt to put the object in a position superior to that of the subject, which would divorce the object from the forces of creation and social relations that help bring it into existence. It is important to keep an awareness that while it is useful to shift the focus of enquiry to things, it must be made clear that the meaning of things is bound by the systems through which the objects are interpreted. ‘The point is not that “things” are any more animated than we used to believe, but rather that they are infinitely malleable to the shifting and contested meanings constructed *for them* through human agency’ (Steiner 210). This study, therefore, avoids either fetishisation of the object or romanicisation of the subject (Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* viii). Neither of them is privileged as prior, but rather, both are seen as mutually constitutive.

In order to demonstrate these notions; their implications, and the synthesis of relationships governing them, the thesis observes and analyses three practical case studies of live performances: an opera production, where the object, rather than text, is key and a point of departure for the opera’s devising process; a performance installation, where the shifting boundary between subject and object is negotiated as a politically charged vehicle of expression; and a performance based on the oral delivery of a written text, where the verbal language itself (the performance score and its delivery during the performance) approaches the status of object, materialising an experience from the past in a way that pushes the notions of materiality and site-specificity beyond their physical boundaries. The case studies are chosen for the specific insights that they provide on the role of objects and materials in relation to the human user and maker in different modalities of performance practice, and in a ‘performance-based’ analytical framework.

The choices of the case studies are conditioned by geographical locations, time limitations, and access to rehearsals and to practitioners, which is why some potential case studies had to be excluded from this study because of the constrictions of such parameters. Moreover, and as the authors of *Devising in Process* (2010) put it, ‘[p]ractitioners writing about their own work can tend towards unintentional mystification, developing a shorthand form of expression where words and phrases have specific meanings, forged from shared training or experience, which can be impenetrable or misleading to the uninformed reader’ (1). Some terms and notions used by artists can be accepted in the creative space, but sit uncomfortably within the boundaries of critical writing, demanding concrete justification. This is one of the main challenges negotiated in this research across the three case studies, which reflects the tension between, from one hand, the fluidity of creative strategies that tend to push the boundaries of the possible and the security of the known, and from another hand, the demands of scholarly writing that involves locking into words what often defies closure and logocentrism. As in many cases of ‘practice-informed’ research that attempts to disseminate a theoretical contribution to knowledge through observing and writing about practice, it is an important challenge to maintain a balance between the above parameters without devaluing the uniqueness of the observed practices when they are replaced by the security of classes, systems and interpretations.

Another challenge identified in this research is the impossibility of seeing the whole of a work process from inception to realisation. For certain parts of a creative process occur beyond the observed or accessible spaces. Therefore, the documentation and analysis presented in those chapters can only be partial, selective and often subjective, '[a]s the observations cannot be complete, neither can they be wholly objective' (Mermikides and Smart 2). Maintaining an outside stance is particularly difficult when my presence is part of the work, as in the first two case studies. In one case, my position changed from a participant to a spectator due to the nature of the work that relies heavily on oral delivery, thus my position at the receiving end was necessary. Conditioned by those factors, rather than pinpointing specific methods or an exhaustive account of working, and instead of identifying singular answers, the aim in all three cases is to locate specific elements that demonstrate, and practically ground, the main argument of this thesis. What I propose to bring to these practices is a sense of historical, methodological and critical contexts within which to locate the processes I observed.

The thesis's analytical framework responds to the intrinsic nature of performance as a live event constituted by the spatial and temporal parameters within which it operates. In its observations and analyses, the thesis draws on my experiences as an observer, a participant and as an audience member of the live events, and the focus will be on both process and product. This is in addition to negotiating written accounts and responses, various forms of documentations of past practices and interviews with practitioners to help orientate the case studies and place them within their historical, political and cultural contexts. My role as a participant-observer, and also as a performer, placed my presence at the centre of most of the examined works, which enabled an experiential understanding of the subject-object tensions and their implications in my relationship to the work. This has placed me in a position as, at once an academic observer, a participant in the making process and a performer, benefiting from the privileges and perspectives attained by being both outside and inside of the works, and also facing the challenges of negotiating between, and being aware of, both positions simultaneously. The following section provides a brief summary of the subjects and the key questions in each of the three case studies.

1.4.1. The Case Studies

The case study presented in Chapter Three is *Satyagraha* (2007, 2008, 2010); an opera written by the American composer Philip Glass, staged in London by the British theatre company Improbable in collaboration with the English National Opera in London, and the Metropolitan Opera in New York. By looking at moments from the devising process, from the rehearsals and the final production, the chapter articulates a critical dialogue on the centrality of objects in the creative process as vehicles for play and production. Reminiscent of Kantor's sensibility to objects, the theatre company's physical and visual approaches to theatre making employ everyday, humble objects, accommodating their inherent materiality in mobilising a creative process. The emphasis, during that process, is on pushing the objects' function beyond instrumentality and representation, transforming them into theatrical spectacles that are loaded with meanings and metaphors. The objects, and their intrinsic materiality, are seen as embodying devising mechanisms in themselves, with the potential to generate stage narrative, and to enhance understanding of performance practice.

By looking at that production, in addition to previous works by the theatre company, I demonstrate how a physical object can activate and mobilise a creative process, which manifests itself in a series of spatiotemporal transformations and exchanges with performers. The company's attitude towards objects during a work process proposes ways of looking at the issues of 'agency' and the 'biography' of things articulated in discourses of material culture studies. I also demonstrate, through examining specific moments from the making process, that the object itself embodies tensions and transformations, shifting between familiarity and its subversion, which destabilises audience's habitual viewing experiences. In those moments of transition from one valid order of perception to another, which happen during a making process as well as in front of spectators, '[t]he perceiving subjects remain suspended between two orders of perception, caught in a state of "betwixt and between." The perceiving subjects find themselves on the threshold which constitutes the transition from one order to another; they experience a liminal state' (Fischer-Lichte 148). This is what I describe as the audience's ability to see the 'double reality' of the object, which the viewing experience of *Satyagraha* demands; or the ability to see one 'reality' of the object, while also being able to see another simultaneously. Performers' ways of approaching and negotiating the objects in Improbeble devising processes induce that state of audience's engagement, as I will show in detail in that chapter.

Invoking the idea of 'listening' to objects, implied in material culture studies as well as in Schwenger's stance towards things, the company members facilitate opportunities to develop relationships between performers and objects that take the form of a dialogue, based on openness and respect towards the latter. These opportunities are used to nurture group work dynamics, seeing them as models comparable by the company with the work between a performer and another. This constitutes a basis for modes of performer training that are grounded on the employment of everyday objects and their material qualities, as I will show by presenting some of the improvisation exercises that are at the heart of the company's practice. Additionally, the creative processes of Improbable in general, and of *Satyagraha* in particular, try to destabilise the authority of the word as the primary activator of narrative and action. The thesis reads this impulse through the notion of objectification, using it as an analytical lens to look at the engagement with the opera's sung language, the Sanskrit, underlining both the problems and the merits of that approach in the staging. In this case, the text is negotiated as an object of devising and improvisation, challenging the fixity of direct representation. I use my position in *Satyagraha* as both an observer and a performer to articulate and illuminate certain aspects of working 'with' objects during the making process.

The second case study, presented in Chapter Four, is the work of visual artist Yael Davids. In the past fifteen years, Davids has been creating performance installations that consistently focus on a direct interaction between human bodies and everyday objects in ways that blur the line between the two. Through such a spatiotemporal dynamic, Davids examines issues related to social violence, oppression and the negation of expression. The installations speak of the complexities of loss and separation, evoking the condition of human beings in conflict and on the threshold between presence and absence. The chapter traces those lines of enquiry through the artist's body of work, locating some of the impulses driving them within her political concerns. By looking closely at the position of the human body within her installations, the chapter discusses the issue of the politics of representation and visibility, which are evoked by the presence of the live human body at the centre of the work of art, to be looked at, and sometimes to be touched. This was made more problematic in some of Davids's previous works that employed the female body as their object. Touching on Peggy Phelan's notions of representational 'visibility' and 'invisibility' in contemporary culture, the chapter argues that the bodies in Davids's work are visible and present, but at the same time, they negotiate the economy of the invisible and the absent, which pushes them beyond the limitations of conventional representation, thus, they counter the negative, objectifying, effects of the consuming gaze. The notion of objectification is central in this thesis's argument. The work suggests a mode of representation that resists the reduction of the visible live body into a site of pleasure and fetishisation by negotiating the limits of objectification.

The chapter then moves its focus onto one of her latest pieces, where I participated as part of the work. The piece, titled *A Line, A Sentence, A Word*, was part of the group exhibition *Memorial to the Iraq War* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (2007). Similar to the artist's previous works, the installation creates a moment of physical engagement between human bodies and physical objects, negotiating a shifting boundary between the two, and investing this shift with political connotations. The installation is situated within two interweaving moments of political conflict in the history of the Middle East: the war in Iraq, presented as the exhibition's main theme, and the Palestine-Israel conflict, which is embedded in the artist's consciousness and personal experiences. The presence of the 'wall' is central to the construction of this installation, which evokes experiences of violent segregation and subjugation caused by the erection of the West Bank Barrier that cuts through the Palestinian land, and that is constantly present in the artist's consciousness. The chapter assesses the capacity of the installation—especially the tension between the subject and the object embodied in it—to respond to the issue of conflict and its implications for the human subjects present in the work of art. Drawing on my experience as a participant in *A Line, A Sentence, A Word*, I will demonstrate that the dynamic of representation in Davids's work occurs within a 'dialectic of negativity,' in Hegel's terms, or within a mode of objectification that reverses its negative effects, or that negates the undermining of the subject's agency. Exploring this case study concludes by stressing that, to put it in Erika Fischer-Lichte's words,

> the human body is not a material like any other (as Craig already recognized) to be shaped and controlled at will. It constitutes a living organism, constantly engaged in the process of becoming, of permanent transformation. The human body knows no state of being; it exists only in a state of becoming. It recreates itself with every blink of the eye, every breath and movement embodies a new body. For that reason, the body is ultimately illusive. The bodily being-in-the world, which cannot *be* but becomes, vehemently refutes all notions of the completed work of art. (92)

The chapter ends with the question of the ethics of performance, which is raised by Davids's employment of the live bodies of others as the objects of her installations.

Finally, the last case study in Chapter Five expands the notion of materiality further to encompass linguistic constructs, such as a performance's textual score and its aural delivery. It aims to show that the notion of materiality is not exclusive to the physical presence of objects and things, but it also includes words, as articulated and exemplified in the writings of Jon Erickson and Peter Schwenger. As a basis for its argument, the chapter refers to 'ruptured' construction of narrative and storytelling as models, seeing the latter as a performance medium that is constructed out of a synthesis of different narratives, voices and registers. Textual interruption is a mode of narrative construction that allows the tension inherent in human experiences to be evoked, as proposed in the works of Walter Benjamin; as well as in Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks's joint publication *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001). The chapter suggests that by employing a combination of the two methods in constructing a performance's score, language's embedded materiality and its capacity to materialise and evoke experiences of places and locales become activated. In extension, the chapter suggests, through an example from Mike Pearson's latest work, that this dynamic of creation can push a performance beyond the confines of physical environments, thus, generating an alternative mode of site-specific performance. It opens up a performance space and transforms it into a receptor of distant and absent places. By this the relation between performance and site is mobilised, and the notion of site-specificity can be destabilised and expanded. In other words, the chapter argues that a performance's written and verbal score can be approached as a 'non-material' site of performance, where places and experiences from the past or from distant locales can be evoked to spectators, which challenges common notions of site-specificity and destabilises the relationship between performance and site.

To demonstrate this proposal, the chapter focuses on *Patagonia*; a reworked version of a touring Brith Gof production that was premiered in 1992 in Swansea, Wales. In 2008 Mike Pearson and Mike Brookes (Pearson/Brookes) presented a reworked version of that piece in Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff, Wales. *Patagonia* is presented in this chapter as a model of a performance that experiments with ways of constructing and delivering a culturally and historically conditioned narrative to reactivate ways of seeing that history. Referring to Benjamin's conception of ‘quotation’ in writing, the case study suggests a form of narrative that takes part in mobilising experiences of a place in ways that go beyond direct representation, thus challenging the closure of linear interpretation. The aim is to represent an historical narrative as multiple, open and unstable; as a strange presence that opens space for questioning and reassessing the past, although with the risk of alienating the audience, which is a point that is acknowledged and raised by the *Patagonia* performance. Through this analysis, the chapter challenges the stabilities of ‘site’ and reconfigures common definitions of ‘site-specificity.’

The three case studies, in different modes of articulation and practice, show that the relationship between the human and the material is active, complex and unstable, with implications that go beyond the immediate interactions between the two. This relationship takes part in grounding the created work within its wider ideological, historical and political contexts, and, consequently, it provokes the audience to actively engage in re-examining their attitudes towards those contexts. Issues of politics and ethics run through the case studies as an inevitable result of the subject-object tensions at their centre. This relationship, therefore, constitutes a vital part of the work’s dramaturgy and of the process of its reception by the audience. It is also bound to evoke problematic questions, which becomes part of what constitutes the work’s significance and its depth, enriching the creation and reception experiences.

The practices presented and analysed are diverse in their methods, intentions and ideologies, but they are bound by their specific attention to objects and physical materials, maintaining a responsive attitude towards them. Even though each mode of performance stems from specific history, concepts and traditions, to which I cannot do full justice in the space of this thesis, they illustrate the approaches of different practitioners to objects, within different contexts, developing work dynamics that participate in, and help understandings of our selves and the world. The notion of objectification runs through the three cases in different manifestations, showing the creative powers and the productive possibilities inherent within this process in certain circumstances.

1.5. The Thesis's Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis is not singular, but it consists of an amalgamation of critical voices that intersect and also converge, which serves the multidisciplinary nature of this study. As evident from the above, the thesis is heavily grounded on the practical case studies in its articulation and demonstration of its central argument. The case studies constitute the majority of the thesis, and it is driven by them, not by a singular theoretical discourse. The critical concepts and theories employed in the thesis are chosen in response to the demands of the key questions raised in each case study, therefore, a number of different critical voices are drawn upon. In general, the thesis does not adopt theoretical paradigms that look at the function of objects in terms of instrumentality and illustration. The object in this study is not considered only as a sign or a symbol that mainly functions as a projection of the self, but as an element that embodies creative tensions and transformations.

Phenomenology with its concern with the manifestation of the world to the body; with the engagement in lived experience between the individual consciousness and reality; its emphasis on the manifestations of experiences not as a series of linguistic signs but as sensory and mental phenomena, provide an ideal ground and a critical point of departure for the main premise of this thesis. In phenomenology, ‘the emphasis is on the presence or “unconcealing” of the world for consciousness rather than its disappearance into language, and therefore on the interplay with the real rather than on its inevitable deferral’ (Fortier 41). The experiential attitude generally adopted towards the relation between the self and the world discussed in much of this thesis lends itself to a phenomenological attitude of perceiving things. Thus the analyses of the case studies borrow from phenomenological theories on self, the object or the thing. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s understanding of the notion of ‘objectification’ is a key concept that runs through all the case studies, providing a useful analytical framewrok to understand apects of the subject-object dynamic.

This is in addition to the use of various contemporary theoretical approaches that adopt phenomenological perspectives, either alone or fused with anthropologist, cultural or feminist and political viewpoints. From the latter category, the thesis touches on the works of Julia Kristeva and Amelia Jones, useful for looking at situations when the live female body is at the centre of a work of art, manifest in performance art practices. Within this context, Peggy Phelan’s cultural and feminist study on political and representational visibility within the mainstream and the avant-garde is also utilised, particularly the issue of the politics of performance and the psychic and political limitations of representational visibility.

Looking at the issue of the materiality of language and its capability to articulate experiences of the past lead to investigations of modern works of philosophy and cultural analysis, such as that of Walter Benjamin, and how he discusses the issues of cultural and historical representation. Particularly of importance is Benjamin’s proposal of using ‘quotations’ in writing as a way of rearticulating experiences of the past. As expressed above, works of material culture studies provide valuable contribution to this thesis for its focus on issues of materiality and the relationship between persons and things in the social world. The theoretically ‘hybrid’ and ‘eclectic’ nature of material culture studies offer a model for this thesis that is similarly multifaceted and multidisciplinary in its critical standpoint.

Each of the three case studies, in chapters Three to Five, negotiates its own set of theoretical concepts. In Chapter Three, the emphasis is on presenting aspects of practice and moments from a work process, explaining some of the methods and techniques that the theatre company employs, and that is identified as a form of creation by devising. This is contextualised by referring to past practices that have influenced the work of the company, or that constitute a useful point of comparison. The company’s attitude towards working with objects is, in some instances, described in terms borrowed from material culture studies, such as the notions of the ‘secondary agency’ of objects, and seeing objects as ‘co-producers’ of meaning and narratives. Defamiliarisation, as introduced through the ideas of Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht in Chapter Two, is a key term that is used to describe some of the implications of the company’s creative process with physical materials.

Chapter Four—in addition to Peggy Phelan’s notions of representational visibility and invisibility, already mentioned above—bases its analysis on the Hegelian notion of the ‘dialectic of negativity,’ introduced in Chapter Two, when looking at the position and the status of the human body as the object of art. Throughout the chapter, the employment of the body in the artist’s work is analysed through various critical and philosophical lenses from phenomenological, psychoanalytical and feminist perspectives. The artist’s practice is compared with the work of women performance artists from the past, identifying points of similarities as well as difference. The main critical framing in Chapter Five, as mentioned above, stems from the work of Walter Benjamin, which has echoes in Pearson and Shanks’s thoughts presented in *Theatre/Archaeology*. Some texts appear consistently throughout the three case studies, emphasised because of the useful insights that they offer, and that respond to several important issues raised in the following chapters, mainly the works of Jon Erickson and Peter Schwenger.

The theoretical framework of this thesis derives from all of the above philosophical, political and cultural perspectives without actually *being* any of them, and without claiming specialisation in any of these disciplines. By borrowing from the different theoretical perspectives I do not legitimate their methodologies as definitive, but I utilise them as aids to help illustrate and articulate the arguments. The thesis attempts to address and open up a space for a multiplicity of voices without privileging one particular voice.

Chapter Two

Objectification as Externalisation and Alienation: Context and Examples

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the concept of ‘objectification’ as it is identified in this thesis, grounding it in examples from creative and social practices. The chapter is positioned as a bridge between the ideas and theories opened up in the previous chapter, and the explorations of practices in the following ones. It aims to distinguish the term from its common negative uses, providing examples of how it might be applied in the creative human life. Objectification is not always seen within positive and productive frameworks. Daniel Miller argues that there is a strong association of the term with a specific form of Marxist analysis that emphasises the rupture in social relations through which people are reduced to objects, and objects in turn impose a controlling presence over relationships between people (*Material Culture and Mass Consumption* 12-13). As he puts it,

> The term objectification is used and understood today mainly in the tradition of Western Marxism, a tradition which incorporates the work […] of the various influential writers who have developed Marx’s ideas since his death. In general, these writers have extended Marx’s treatment of the term along the same trajectory so that objectification has become increasingly divorced from its original positive context, and is now understood as a negative expression of ‘petrification’ as the major instrument of estrangement. (*Material Culture and Mass Consumption* 43)

What this study looks at is a particular notion of objectification that mobilises, rather than eradicates, subjective agency in performance processes, and that can be used as an analytical framework that helps to articulate and develop an awareness of issues of self, otherness and identity. I will demonstrate how in objectification processes personal, social and cultural identities become embodied and objectified in the things humans create and interact with. Therefore, I propose an alternative reading of objectification as a concept that provides ways of understanding the relationship between subjects and objects in social and creative contexts, overcoming the dualism in modern thought that regards them as separate and opposed entities. Christopher Tilley similarly argues for objectification that is related to 'what things are and what things do in the social world: the manner in which objects or material forms are embedded in the life worlds of individuals, groups, institutions or, more broadly, culture and society' ('Objectification' 60).

In the following, a basic contextualisation of the concept of objectification will be introduced, tying it to examples of social and cultural practices. The discussion has been separated here into two sections, one dealing with objectification as externalisation and the other with objectification as alienation. In practice, the two systems are closely connected and are seen together as key to the construction of the individual. I will demonstrate that the concept of objectification, as originated in Hegel's philosophy, possesses an efficacious capacity, actually causing physical transformations in the space of performance, thus showing that it is not strictly an abstract concept as argued in the Marxist critique.[20] The intrinsic contradiction the concept implies can aid in considering the ambiguity of the creative and cultural processes of production, and can itself be utilised as a creative tool. As Miller argues, the notion of objectification as a cultural process 'allows us to retain the original Hegelian proposition that self-alienation is an inseparable part of a positive process, but one which has an intrinsically contradictory nature' (*Material Culture and Mass Consumption* 43).

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[20] Hegel's notions of objectification and self-alienation as essential moments in the process of self-realisation have been critiqued, primarily by Marx. In the Hegelian metaphysical system, alienation is regarded as a state of consciousness that can be overcome only by another state of consciousness. On the other hand, alienation in Marx's philosophy is an act of physical creation related closely to the material production of life, utilizing the material world of nature, not as what he believes as mere intellectual positing for Hegel. For Marx, alienation is a historical, not a mental, process, brought about by historical and socioeconomic conditions. Thus he rejects Hegel for turning such a historically, socially and economically conditioned phenomenon into an abstract idea that takes place in subjective states of consciousness (Churchich 35-36). Marx claims that '[t]he only labour Hegel knows and recognizes is *abstract mental* labour' (*Early* 386). Christopher J. Arthur argues that Hegel in his conception of objectification that leads to estrangement, instead of a 'real *historical* solution,' provides 'a displacement of the problem into general philosophical reflection issuing in a solution posed exclusively *within philosophy*, which preserves estrangement ('otherness as such') as a moment in the absolute' (Arthur). The examples I provide demonstrate that the Hegelian concept has direct implications in the practical realms of life; it is not only regarded as an abstract notion.

2.1. Objectification as Externalisation

The concept of objectification, as a means of understanding the relationship between people and things, can be traced back to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807/1977) and Marx's later materialist appropriation of the Hegelian notion. Contrary to the negative connotations of the term that implies the transformation of people into objects in certain social relationships, objectification for Hegel entails a positive meaning that sees it as an essential moment of externalisation necessary for the historical development and the self-realisation of the subject. Primarily, it implies dynamics of self-realisation through externalising aspects of that self as in moments of creating products of labour (objects, artefacts and things), or in actualising ideas and purposes in the world. Hegel writes in *Introduction to Aesthetics* (1979),

> man brings himself before himself by *practical* activity, since he has the impulse, in whatever is directly given to him, in what is present to him externally, to produce himself and therein equally to recognize himself. This aim he achieves by altering external things whereon he impresses the seal of his inner being and in which he now finds again his own characteristics. Man does this in order, as a free subject, to strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself. (31)

According to Hegel, we see ourselves in altering and making things and artefacts; in our own doing. Therefore, humans consider the objects they create as evidence of their capacities and of the meaningfulness of their lives. Through the product of their labour, they express their personality and the social relations in which the labour was carried out. Philip J. Kain gives examples of an engineer who builds bridges or an artist who creates pictures. Without objectifying, realising or expressing their ideas, intentionalities and capacities into material forms, their identities as artist or engineer would not develop. 'The only way a thing becomes real is by being objectified and recognized' (Kain 49). The objects of human's labour activate the social world and preserve the labourer's action in them. They become objects that define the labourer, constituting part and parcel of her/his own being. Objectification in this context describes a dynamic relationship within which both subject and object are created. It becomes the very essence of the development of the subject, and without it there can be no progression (Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* 29).

This aspect of subject's transformation has implications in both artistic and social modes of production, which is demonstrated in an example that Daniel Miller provides from the field of anthropology, and which I borrow for its relevance. Miller draws on the anthropological studies of Nancy D. Munn, particularly an article she wrote in 1977 on the construction of canoes on the small island of Gawa, New Guinea. In that article, Munn argues that to understand what is being created when Gawans make a canoe, the total cycle of the canoe's fabrication must be considered, which begins in the conversion of raw materials into a canoe, and continues in exchange with the conversion of the canoe into other objects (Munn 39). This approach to object analysis underscores the importance of its 'cultural biography' (including its form, use and trajectory as a commodity) to appropriately understand human-ascribed values and their relationships to the wider social dynamics. This means that an object needs to be analysed from production, through exchange or distribution, to consumption, which is demonstrated in Munn's article. The emphasis in her study is upon the manner in which the use of external relations acts to construct the self-image of a society, as a subject in relation to some 'other,' thus objectification is extended to include a relationship between societies (Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* 60).

Munn describes the processes of construction and decoration of the canoes in order to be launched out as part of the kula ring (a rough circle of islands connected by an exchange network of a series of valuables, such as shellbands and necklaces). The process of production and exchange is considered in terms of a series of transformations in spatiotemporal perspectives, through which the canoe moves, symbolically and physically, from the island to the outside world, moving the canoe far from its actual makers. In the creation of such an object, social relations and links to the land become implicated. The beach, as the place of production, emphasises the links between the territory of the community and the outside world (*Material Culture and Mass Consumption* 61). Particularly the adornment of the canoe's prowboard, which plays a special part in the fabrication cycle, symbolises production as a process of externalising value (Munn 40). The symbolism of the decoration is resonant of a whole series of transformations; these include transformations from the heavy, stable tree to the light, seagoing canoe. The conversion of materials into a canoe necessarily effects a transformation in motion that, in addition to the spatiotemporal dimensions, redefines the relation between inanimate materials and animate persons (Munn 41). Munn's account suggests that the people of a certain society 'invest' themselves in the act of creating a cultural object. The investment of the subject in the creation of this object is made explicit in the anthropomorphic symbolism applied to the canoe prowboards, which are ornamented and beautified in a manner analogous with that of the human body.[21] Munn notes that '[v]erbal labels for human body parts are also playfully transferred to prowboard parts. Primarily through this adornment, the canoe acquires virtual properties of form that synthesize the non-human and human domains. This beautification […] also encodes subjective human reference within the material form of the canoe' (47). The transformation of the canoe from a static to a mobile entity, and its anthropomorphic qualities as animate human over inanimate object, embody a process of externalisation of humans' productive and subjective forces. It becomes a process of creating an object in which social relations are implicated.

The eventual launch of the canoe into the kula for the use of other people, far from its original point of production, poses the problem of alienation: certain conditions serve to separate the creators from the object of their creative processes. This sense of alienation, Miller argues, is recovered in the relationship the people have with the objects for which they exchange their canoes (such as shellbands or necklaces known as *kitomu*). These objects of exchange gain their significance from the social relations which are objectified by the act of exchange. Through various exchange ceremonies, the external exchange systems are articulated with internal exchange networks. These objects are redistributed internally through the same kin networks which were mobilised to produce the canoe. The object itself is seen as creative of social relations, through a process by which people self-alienate, only to have this aspect of themselves returned in a new form in the substance of the exchange (*Material Culture and Mass Consumption* 61-62). Munn suggests that the canoe's irreversible journey as an exchange valuable does not alienate it from its producers; all its conversions return to the owning clan (47). As she puts it

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[21] Munn explains that elements on the boards may be metaphorically described by human labels. For example, the moons are the canoe's 'eyes,' the end of a small canoe are its 'ears.' On the vertical board, the outer curve may be the 'chest,' the inner curve its 'shoulders.' A separate carving of birds at the top of the vertical boards is the 'head' or 'hair.' The forms delineated by the carving and shaping of the boards are thus anthropomorphized. Prowboards are also washed in the sea before painting, which parallels the cosmetic preparation of the human body for ceremonial decor (47).

> [The objects of exchange symbolise the whole cycle of producing the canoe] as being one of producing and maximising value for Gawans through a process of detaching materials from Gawan lands, converting them into seagoing vessels that connect Gawa and other islands, and then again sending these seagoing vessels away from Gawa on irreversible exchange paths. Finally, like *reputation*, the canoe comes back to Gawa as an adorning object produced by others. (51)

The value generated by the cycle of the canoe's fabrication and its outward movement is returned to the self in new form. Constructing the Gawan dynamic of social and commodity exchange is partly developed through an initial externalisation process involving the separation of internal elements such as the canoes, and their transaction into the world of exchange between the islands. Thus the process of the object's construction can be seen as embodying of multiple and complex dynamics that continually redefine the human relationship to the object world. What Miller tries to show through this example is a mode of subject development that occurs through a form of social self-alienation. In that process, objectification can be understood as 'a process of externalisation and sublation which is dependent upon the relationship between two societies, and not merely the internal workings of one' (*Material Culture and Mass Consumption* 62). As such, this model may assist in understanding phenomena such as the kula exchange networks where alienation becomes part of a collective progressive process.

This process can be applied to other modes of creation that are conditioned by a relationship between the object and the social and personal identities of its maker as an individual. The creation of objects of art sometimes serves as a direct materialisation of the artist's presence and as an externalisation of personal aspects of her/his self. The process of creation in some of these cases functions as a way of regaining and preserving a sense of coherence and moral and psychological stability for the creating subject. A vivid example comes in the form of a piece of embroidery displayed in the textile collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum dating back to c.1830. The piece is believed to be produced by Elizabeth Parker of Ashburnham, Sussex, and is categorised as a 'sampler,' which is a form of needlework that was produced by women as a demonstration of skill, refinement of taste and strength of moral virtue.[22] By around 1600, samplers were associated with well-to-do women because of the long time it took to make them and the high cost of embroidery silk. Embroidery was often a daylight activity that could only be undertaken by those in liberal circumstances, thus it was an indicator of social class. They often included the alphabet, figures, motifs, decorative borders, the names of the persons who embroidered them, prayers or moral quotations. These samplers were highly valued, often passed down through generations. By the nineteenth century, they became generally identified with social acceptability, domestic values and female discipline (Llewellyn 64). Parker's unusual sampler, seen as modest in its artifice, humble in its display of artistry and use of materials, stands out for its divergence from the above common pattern, which questions the original intention behind its creation. It demonstrates a special case in its stark evocation of private memory and its intimate relation to the maker’s own person. Created within ambiguous authorship and social contexts, the piece of textile has a modest provenance and was made for a limited audience, if any at all. It seems, as Nigel Llewellyn observes, that ‘it was undertaken privately, intimately, perhaps covertly and probably tearfully’ (63). It was more of an autobiographical textual work that stands like a page in a personal diary stitched by a single female hand, not for public display or demonstration of skill, but in a woman’s attempt to endure adverse personal and social circumstances.

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[22] Samplers were gender-specifically produced by women makers, since the patience and stamina needed to embroider them were seen as primary female accomplishments (Llewellyn 64).

The work takes the form of a rectangular panel of plain white linen covered by neatly and competently cross-stitched lettering in scarlet silk with virtually no punctuation and with minimum of the ornamentation typical of the sampler tradition: no flowers, no alphabets, no Bible verses or birthdates marks. The carefully drawn lines seem like an endless, breathless stream of words running across the fabric. The first line begins, ‘As I cannot write I put this down simply and freely as I might speak to a person to whose intimacy and tenderness I can fully intrust myself and who I know will bear with all my weaknesses’ (Llewellyn 68).[23] The creator goes on to tell the story of her life. The stitched text starts with a section of autobiography that reveals Parker’s humble social background and her occupation in domestic service from the age of thirteen, as a nursery maid then as a housemaid. During that time, Parker was mistreated by some of her employers ‘with cruelty to[o] horrible to mention,’ recalling one incident where she was thrown down the stairs (Llewellyn 69). Even though she moved to other homes, the subsequent line ‘my memory failed me and my reason was taken from me’ suggests the psychological hardships she suffered at the time as a consequence (Llewellyn 69). Her words then reveal her sense of guilt and self-blame for considering the ‘great sin of self destruction,’ which refers to her suicidal attempts that were defeated by her fear of God (Llewellyn 69). Her words, ‘I am one of the most miserable objects the ever the Lord let live,’ show the extent of her turmoil and desolation (Llewellyn 70). The tone of her lamentation rises in the following passages where she breaks off into a stream of meditations on guilt and salvation. They shift between reaching out to God and a desire to end her misery by contemplating death. At the very end of the text, the words abruptly end near the middle of the fabric, in mid-sentence, with the incomplete line ‘what will become of my soul,’ without closing punctuation (Llewellyn 71). It seems as if the author lost her words, leaving behind a large blank space of silence.

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[23] The sections from the text quoted here are extracted from Nigel Llewellyn’s article that provides a full transcription of the sampler in an Appendix (68-71). The Victoria and Albert Museum’s webpage provides another transcription in addition to a photograph of the sampler at http://www.vam.ac.uk/images/image/65677-popup.html

In contrast to the conventional role of the sampler as a marker of skill and social privilege, Parker’s piece became a painful evocation of a woman’s suffering, loneliness and depression. It reads like a journal entry; a prayerful entreaty to God for mercy and sustenance. The work’s expressive potential is concentrated in the intricate stitches on the fabric’s surface and the personal narrative that lies underneath them. Their expressivity is heightened by the painstaking depiction in letters formed of tiny cross-stitches, in stark red on a plain linen ground. The piece of fabric is vertically stretched in its display case on the wall of the V&A Museum resembling skin, tattooed with the blood-red words. It stands for Parker’s skin, embodied with the traces of her self and brought to life with the narrative it directly and indirectly evokes. The piece of work is intimately linked to the self of its maker, thus becoming key in the transmission of narrative and meaning. In such work, the memory of the artist is openly externalised, revealing not only the presence of the artist, but also an insight into the artist's emotional state at the moment of creation. It is partly similar to identifying the imprint of the potter's fingers on a vase; the marks left by the painter in the pigment; or a sculpture that is cast from the artist's own body, which raises questions about the ways in which works of art materialise traces of the artist's presence on their very surface. The visible traces of the artist's own person on the work itself has always been a source of intrigue that adds value and a special allure to an object as a physical embodiment of the artist that brings her/his life closer to spectators. This is perhaps why the sampler captivated spectators more than any other conventional piece of embroidery in spite of its modesty. Llewellyn argues that despite the aesthetic limits of Parker's sampler, spectators, during a special exhibition at the V&A Museum where the piece was displayed, were fascinated by it and their imaginations were provoked by the tragic story it told (63). An observer of the piece comments, '[b]y reading her words you enter her personal, private, hidden darkness and you have the distinct feeling of peeking through someone's diary, a feeling that seems in complete contrast with its position on a museum wall' (Merrygold). This comment points to the question of whether the piece was intended for public display, and if it would have still preserved its intense personal tone if the maker had known what would become of her creation.

As for Parker herself, the deeply personal confessional and repentant work, an externalisation of her subjective state executed with patience and obsessive precision, seems to have functioned as a therapeutic mechanism; or as a way of keeping her memory alive for her and preserving her stability in the face of adversity. It encouraged her to reflect on her past and to work against fits of shame and depression in a process of separation and reincorporation. The object potentially became part of the constitution of her sense of self, and as in the previous example, the cycle of its creation defied the effects of alienation and rupture regardless of the fate of the final work. Llewellyn argues that

> in exchange for the work and craft of her stitching, Elizabeth Parker gains in spiritual strength as she fashions narrative about her weaknesses. Through its capacity to act as a constant reminder or memorial of her sin, the textile releases the efficacious power of memory to help shape the future and support a victim of ignorance and patriarchal abuse. (66)

In exchange for externalising her personal memory and private thoughts onto the surface of the material and, subsequently, into the public space, the materialisation of her traces inscribed in silk embroidery returned back aspects of the self lost to her at the time of creating the work. Parker's presence can still be felt in the piece in spite of its spatiotemporal separation from her as its creator. Her subjective authority is not denied regardless of the ambiguity surrounding the history and authenticity of that authority. In the above two examples, objectification is understood as a process of development and as an essential element in the construction of individuals and societies. It is a process in which both things and people are seen as mutually constitutive.

2.2. Objectification as Alienation

The concept of objectification as externalisation is necessarily linked to the notion of alienation. In Hegel's view, alienation comes after the transfer of one's own possession to somebody else, in other words, that comes after externalisation (Churchich 33). As Hegel puts it, 'actual self-consciousness, through its externalization, passes over into the actual world, and the latter back into actual self-consciousness' (*Phenomenology* 295). Consequently, every objectification is an instance of alienation, which means that man is unavoidably alienated in object-making, which is for Hegel 'an ontological fact, rooted in the nature of human existence' (Churchich 34, 35). Thus alienation is understood as a stage in the development of the self. Marx, on the other hand, offers a different treatment of that term.

Marx agrees that objectification is essential to man's life and progress if it entails the transformation of nature into the expression of the self. But when this form of human productive activity is inverted, as under capitalist economic structures, objectification turns into oppressive and inhuman alienation that transforms human beings into things. Marx sees that under these conditions, the worker's activity is transformed to passivity, and the worker her/himself is transformed into a thing (Churchich 80). The worker under capitalist economy of production becomes so dehumanised that he 'sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities' (Marx, *Economic* 67). The worker in that case of alienation 'is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien* object.' He becomes 'a slave of his object,' and all that remains of him is merely an abstract individual (Marx, *Economic* 70, 71). Therefore, instead of leading man to self-realisation, as in Hegel's thesis, objectification in a capital-dominated society causes oppressive, dehumanising alienation (Churchich 37). The capitalist methods of production 'mutilate the worker into a fragment of a human being, degrade him to become a mere appurtenance of the machine' (Marx, *Capital* 713). 'Rupture' and 'separation' are essential to Marx's understanding of alienation, which is conceived as a separation of individuals from their '*human* essence' (Wood 21).

Differently in Hegel’s use, alienation is a positive epistemological device that describes a dual process where a subject externalises itself in a creative act of differentiation, but then this externalisation is reappropriated in an act which Hegel terms as ‘sublation’ (Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* 28).[24] The examples above demonstrate in different ways how the separation caused by objectification processes becomes reincorporated into the subject, reconstituting the self in relation to the product of labour and in relation to the outside world, by this the rupture and separation caused by alienation are overcome. As Hegel puts it, ‘self-consciousness has sublated this alienation [*Entäusserung*] and objectivity ... so that it is at home with itself in its otherness as such’ (*Phenomenology* 422). Miller explains, ‘[t]his act eliminates the separation of the subject from its creation but does not eliminate this creation itself; instead, the creation is used to enrich and develop the subject, which then transcends its earlier state’ (*Material Culture and Mass Consumption* 28).

It is in this frame that Miller proposes the use of objectification as a key analytical model to understand the dynamic relationship between people and things, as in his volume *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987). The tension inherent in that process, caused by what I describe as objectification and its ‘reversal,’ prevents the complete transformation of the human form into an object. This paradoxical state is termed as ‘the dialectic of negativity as the moving and producing principle' (Marx, *Early* 386). Primarily seen as a progressive and productive principle, through a dialectic of negativity the subject realises itself by setting up oppositions and negating them, or what Hegel calls 'the labour of the negative' (*Phenomenology* 18).[25]

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[24] Ronald Gray explains that according to Hegel, a dialectical process is always under way, whereby something that is initially whole, at one with itself, is disrupted and forced to become a duality; a separate individual rather than an integrated part of a whole, which may be, for example, society. It is equally part of the process, however, that that which is divided seeks to become united again. Hegel applies this dialectical system also to the process of thought. Gray goes on to explain that to assume unthinkingly that an object is as we assume it to be, Hegel says, is a common form of self-deception. Only when an object is removed, ‘alienated,’ is it possible for it to be known (Gray 74-75). A genealogy of thought can be clearly traced between this understanding proposed by Hegel and the notion of defamiliarisation as Shklovsky and Brecht both utilised it, as will be demonstrated below.

This understanding of alienation, as embodying of the dialectic of negativity, has wider implications in art, literary and theatrical practices. It is at the heart of what the Russian formalists have called 'defamiliarisation' or *ostranenie*, which is a term coined by Viktor Shklovsky in 1917 to describe the artistic technique of making the familiar strange as a means of countering the habituation or automatisation of perception. Focusing primarily on literary examples in his essay 'Art as Technique,' Shklovsky introduces the notion of defamiliarisation as a means to force individuals to recognise artistic language and to resist the reductive effects of habitual perception. 'We see the object as though it were enveloped in a sack,' he argues. 'We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette' (15). This way of perception annihilates the object, and the whole of life, pushing it into the realms of the 'known,' thus we lose our ability to see them afresh and to question worn stereotype or dead metaphor. That is why, Shklovsky believes, 'art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known' (16). Shklovsky emphasises the capacity of art to make forms difficult and to increase the length and the difficulty of perception. The creation of new forms of art in this way resurrects things and restores sensations of the world. Defamiliarisation transforms the object from something ordinary or functional, into a work of art. Shklovsky draws on the work of Leo Tolstoy as exemplar of defamiliarisation. He refers to *Kholstomer*; a story that is narrated by a horse that describes the world around it from its point of you. It makes the content of the story seems unfamiliar, which establishes a shift in perspective as a means of social criticism (Shklovsky 16).

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[25] Which is also the 'negation of negation;' a concept used by Brecht, which will be explained in the following discussion on the concept of defamiliarisation.

Removing things out of their habitual context and resituating them in new perspectives is a common presentation device in twentieth-century art, as in Dada and surrealism, which enables the well known to be as if seen for the first time. In an attempt to challenge the line separating art from everyday life, and to question the art institution and the status of the artist, artists from these movements used found objects as works of art, such as Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917, replica 1964) that consists of a mass-produced urinal. By putting his signature on the object, and by placing it upside down on a pedestal in a gallery space, Duchamp transformed that ordinary object into an artwork that shifts the focus away from physical craft to intellectual interpretation. The object in that position evokes various images that take it away from its original function as a urinal. In these works of art and literature, the process of defamiliarisation functions paradoxically in a form analogous to Hegel's dialectic of negativity. Defamiliarisation emphasises the perception of commonality by subverting the commonality itself. The presented objects are still recognised as familiar, yet that familiarity is then destabilised when the object is shown in a new light. Defamiliarising the works of art, as advocated by Shklovsky, embodies the 'negation of negation,' which is also central to Brecht's understanding of defamiliarisation in his well-known concept of *Verfremdungseffekt*; the main feature of his epic theatre and drama.[26] Through this concept, Brecht uses defamiliarisation consciously, as a calculated and strategic device.

Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* is similar to Shklovsky's *ostranenie* in how it aims to disrupt the linearity and continuity of habitual recognition. They are, in a way, variations of the same artistic phenomenon, but they differ as concepts in either their devices or in their ideological connotations. They primarily suggest different artistic renderings of the concept of alienation (Jestrovic 21, 24). Employing theatrical devices of making the familiar strange—such as the aesthetic of naivety that takes the audience by surprise; the absurd and the grotesque that subvert the conventional relations between signifier and signified; laying the device bare, or exposing systems of mediation; the play between the real and the fictional; breaking the 'forth wall' or the direct address to the audience; in addition to other means of breaking the illusion—establish a divergence from convention necessary to counteract the habitualisation of perception. Confronted by these devices, the spectators' relationship to reality is renegotiated and problematised, and their role in the creative process is activated.

Silvija Jestrovic explains that *Verfremdungseffekt* 'is a calculated, Socratic device to distance the spectator in a certain direction of comprehension. It is at the same time a construction of disbelief and belief. Through the devices of *Verfremdung*, Brecht breaks the illusion of reality on the stage, to establish the illusion of breaking the illusion' (20). Like the oppositions embodied in *ostranenie*, cancelling the illusion presupposes the prior creation of illusion, and the theatrical effects desired by Brecht are produced by the interplay of generating and destroying illusion. Although Brecht himself did not explicitly mention it, as Ronald Gray believes (73), these oppositions reflect the influence of Hegel on Brecht's formulation that embodies the dialectic system of the 'negation of negation.'[27] This can be traced in Brecht's comment on the 'alienation effect' as that which

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[26] Brecht introduces the term *Verfremdung* for the first time in his article 'Alienation Effects in Chinese Theatre,' written in 1936 (Jestrovic 17).

> occurs when the thing to be understood, the thing to which attention to be drawn, is changed from an ordinary, well-known, immediately present thing into a particular, striking, unexpected thing. In a certain sense the self-evident is made incomprehensible, although this only happens in order to make it all the more comprehensible. (qtd. in Gray 71)

The comment reveals the tension inherent in such dynamic of presentation, which proves that Brecht envisaged a dialectical process. It implies that the renewed recognition of an object is only reached when 'negation' is itself 'negated.' Alienating what was known from the original impression it made is a first step of negation. But the true recognition of an object, previously mistakenly seen, is only reached when this 'negation' itself is 'negated.' *Verfremdungseffekt* thus is not simply alienation, or the rupture that oppresses human agency as in the Marxist understanding, but it implies the second step of the dialectic that Hegel considers. Brecht's intention is not merely to make the familiar unfamiliar; to estrange it, but to lead to a fresh vision of reality. It is at this point, it is argued, that Brecht comes nearest to Hegel's mode of thought (Gray 75).[28] *Verfremdungseffekt*, therefore, adopts a positive connotation that involves a continuous process of transition from one point to the other: from the point of familiarity with a certain object, to the point where this familiarity is challenged, which can also be said of *ostranenie*.

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[27] In John J. White's *Bertolt Brecht's Dramatic Theory* (2004), Brecht is quoted saying '*Verfremdung als ein Verstehen* (verstehen – nicht verstehen – verstehen), Negation der Negation' (qtd. in White 123). This can be translated as 'alienation is understood as the Negation of Negation' (Translation by the author of this thesis).

[28] White confirms that Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* contains distinct traces derived from Hegel rather than Marx. It echoes the ideas in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, particularly the dialectic of negation, albeit in the theatrical sense that something negative (seemingly familiar reality) is negated through the process of *Verfremdungseffekt* in order that true knowledge can be achieved (123). Ronald Gray also argues that Brecht uses Hegel's word, *Entfremdung*, rather than his own, *Verfremdungseffekt*, on one occasion in a passage from a piece written in 1936, where he writes of his refusal to allow spectators to yield themselves up uncritically to an empathetic self-identification with the characters on stage (75). Brecht writes, '[i]t was the alienation [*Entfremdung*] that is necessary in order that there may be understanding. Wherever things are "matter of course," the attempt at understanding has simply been

On stage, this transformation turns stage elements into a set of transformable signs, where—as suggested throughout the modernist paradigms mentioned in the previous chapter—the boundary between the human performer and the physical object on stage shifts, enabling free play with theatrical signs. A broom in one scene turns into a tree in another; a human performer's body turns into an object. Even the human body becomes a transformable sign under devices of theatrical estrangement and through means of reinforcing the tension between the illusionist and anti-illusionist forces, which disrupts the convention of make-believe and destabilises the notion of completeness of the dramatic world. This form of 'theatricality' as an estrangement concept counteracts the habituation of perception, calling attention to the fictionality and incompleteness of the represented world on stage.[29] It is theatricality that 'reinforces the notion of the theatrical stage as a place of play and artifice, which does not copy reality but represents it through its eminent theatrical means' (Jestrovic 34). This relationship between objectification, in terms of the dialectic of negativity, and theatricality will be helpful to understand and analyse the case study in the following chapter, particularly focusing on the defamiliarised object on stage and how perception of it shifts between familiarity and the subversion of this familiarity. More broadly, the idea of the dialectic is fundamental to

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given up' (qtd. in Gray 75). Gray believes that it seems likely that Brecht had Hegel in mind at that moment (75). Whether or not this is the case, alienation for Brecht is evidently conceived within the Hegelian frame of thought; as a device that has productive connotations applicable to processes of theatre making and reception.

[29] Silvija Jestrovic defines 'theatricality' as that which 'functions as a distancing device when it foregrounds that which is eminent to theatre, including the difference between the character and the actor, the exaggeration of body language and make-up, the display of the theatre's means of production, and so on' (34).

performance practice that inherently embraces an unresolved dialectical tension between co-existing two states. Those opposing states are not reduced to one, but they are sustained in their difference. Performing, as a consequence, is a deliberate creation of paradoxes that provokes the audience to enquiry and critique.[30]

2.3. Conclusion

For both Hegel and Marx, objectification is implicated in action, in the physical production of things which are therefore active in the self-constitution of identities and in the interactions between people. It becomes apparent from the examples above that things are not just objectifications at the point of their production, but also through their life cycles; in moments of exchange, appropriation and consumption. Objects circulate through people's activities and can contextually produce new types of activities, objects and events (Tilley, 'Objectification' 60-61). The idea of objectification, often approached with a sense of anxiety and skepticism in Western thought, has different resonances in other cultural contexts. The view of objectification processes as integral to ideas of self-development of individuals as well as communities is traced in non-Western paradigms and frames of thought. In Buddhism, for example, the subject-object binary is unstable, making no distinction between natural and mental phenomena; or between objects and ideas; things and concepts. This is partly because in Buddhism, the world is not divided into concrete realities on the one hand, and mental realities on the other, but rather they are seen as two poles of a continuum. The attitude in Buddhism does not entail a negation of states of objectivity, nor an affirmation of them, rather the impulse is to occupy a position in between, transcending their opposition (George, *Buddhism* 54-55). In other traditions, objectification in dynamics of faith and worship is not divorced from notions of human agency. This is evident in the role of pain and suffering in religious history manifest, for example, in the participation in public ritual dramas and the attitudes towards forms of martyrdom, which are seen in some religious practices, as in Christianity and Islam, as mobilisers of individual and social identities (Asad 78, 85-87). This is not to promote pain and suffering as intrinsically valuable within social relationships, or to propose them as basis to humans' claim to empowerment, but it is to show an alternative view to the secular emphasis on the human body as a bounded locus of moral sovereignty, thus destabilising common notions of objectification.

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[30] The idea of the 'ambiguous' nature of performance is a central theme in David George's article 'On Ambiguity: Towards a Post-Modern Performance Theory' (1989), which I will draw upon in the concluding chapter.

In performance contexts, human beings are also objectified (sometimes literally utilising pain as a performance device), and the uniformity of the subject as a physical entity is challenged, which is not always seen as forms of humans' subjugation or transformation into things. Jon Erickson argues that '[a]n objectified human being is not merely an object but is rather someone who exists and experiences the objectification of her- or himself in daily life.' In order to be aware of one's own subjective action or thinking, one's self needs to be objectified; in other words, to designate the subject by placing it against the ground of the object (5). Apart from seeing objectification as a dehumanising force, as in discussions of the gaze inherent in power and gender relations, which are in themselves eminently pertinent arguments, objectification can be a way of constructing the self in efficacious forms; as 'in the self-objectifying revelations of one's own unconscious, in making oneself an object of everyday life performance—an object of respect, of affection, of desire, even of dread—a force in women's performance art' (Erickson 6). The objectification of the self (in that case, the self of the artist) should not necessarily be understood as a fixation in time of a unitary personality, but as 'the exemplification of a particular "self" […] that can be continuously altered through the production of new work' (Erickson 39). The process of objectification is never entirely completed. It is an aspect of continuous becoming of an ongoing consciousness that needs to objectify things in order to recognise them in the first place. Thus an art object, a literary object, even a theoretical object is not static; rather it is something that is always being objectified.

Chapter Three

The Alchemy of Materiality: Everyday Objects as Mobilisers of a Creative Process in the Work of Improbable Theatre Company

3.1. Introduction

‘[Ideas] [g]ive me a queasy feeling, nausea. […] Objects in the external world, on the other hand, delight me’ (Ponge, ‘My Creative Method’ 93).

The French poet Francis Ponge is among the twentieth-century thinkers who locate the point of origin of human experience in external reality, particularly objects. In Ponge’s writings, the object serves as a focal point for an interrogation of the world and for a questioning of the nature of human existence. He believes that solid things available to us at hand, in everyday life, restore our balance and stability in the vertiginous world we live in. ‘Objects pull us from the *néant*, and we are grateful,’ he argues (qtd. in Stamelman 428). At the same time, Ponge maintains the objects’ function in the world, for very often this function is what defines the objects’ uniqueness and distinguished qualities. Thus he internalises the object’s use and makes it part of its definition (Stamelman 427). The section from Ponge’s essay quoted above reflects a longing for the reliability and vitality of the ‘objects in the external world’ (‘My Creative Method’ 93), as opposed to the instability and abstraction of ideas. It is chosen at the opening of this chapter because it captures the main creative impulse at the heart of the work explored here; primarily, the desire to learn from materiality and to subvert its everyday function and familiarity. This is described by the creators of the work as a process of ‘alchemizing’ ordinary everyday objects and materials, and turning them into theatrical gems. The implications of Ponge's essay is also at the heart of their physical, and body-based approach to theatre making that relies heavily on the nature of objects and on the physical and spatial relationships to stage elements, including the written text. Even the latter is approached the way a physical material is negotiated in a creative process. As in the essay; the emphasis is on the 'external world' of objects and their delight, rather than the 'internal world' of ideas and their queasiness. Objects in this way of understanding do not necessarily designate a projection of our own subjectivities and desires, which is a function that is commonly ascribed to them. Objects can also express their 'voice.'

The work presented in this chapter calls for an active contact between people and things, fundamentally recognising objects as participants in reshaping the world. Elizabeth Grosz thinks that '[t]he thing has a history: it is not simply a passive inertia against which we measure our own activity. It has a "life" of its own, characteristics of its own, which we must incorporate into our activities in order to be effective, rather than simply understand, regulate, and neutralize from the outside' ('The Thing' 125). Grosz emphasises 'action' as a condition for an 'effective' relationship with materiality; a capability to achieve results and reach places. It is action that requires that we see and understand the materials' own life; their characteristics and ways of gaining efficacy. It requires the ability to follow the path of the materials' history and integrate that history into present and future activities. She argues that,

> It is matter, the thing, that produces life; it is matter, the thing, which sustains and provides life with its biological organization and orientation; and it is matter, the thing, that requires life to overcome itself, to evolve, to become more. We find the thing in the world as our resource for making things, and in the process, for leaving our trace on things. (Grosz, 'The Thing' 125)

Grosz's repetitive reference to the 'thing' in the above quotation functions as a constant reminder that reverberates in the mind with the traces of materiality embodied in that word. It builds an image of a relationship with things conditioned by physicality, action, practice, transformation and movement at its heart where the thing becomes a provocation and an incitement. It is a thing that generates ways of creation and enables practice. Thus the material becomes the provocation to, and the result of, our action (Grosz, 'The Thing' 125).

It is no surprise then that objects and things find home in theatre practice as a field of action and creation. The theatre provides the conditions for the subject-object relationship to function as a site of transformation and exchange, and for objects to take active and central roles in creative processes, often initiating and triggering them off. The physicality of the thing, its existence in space and time, and its embedded history and material characteristics all initiate immediate, tangible and visible results when it is present alongside the human performer. Garner states, 'the availability of objects allows the actor to claim a place in a material world, to interact with it in terms of human intention, and to emerge as a physical presence in the field of performance' (88). In the creative process of a performance, the continuous experimentation with physical objects to produce new things and new sets of relationships that elude the flux of everyday life serve to extend the subject's corporeal boundaries and to ground the body in its material surroundings. This activates the capacities of performance as a field of transformation and fluidity, in which the dissolving of boundaries; the shifting of perspectives and states of liminality are some of its inherent strategies as a creative medium.

The materiality of performance is generated on stage in the present to be destroyed the moment it is created in a continuous cycle of generation and regeneration. The capacity of the object as an initiator of such processes of creation, destruction and regeneration has attracted theatre practitioners to integrate it as the starting point, and as a creative contributor to a work process in a multiplicity of ways. Objects in those instances help to provoke movements and gestures, inspire the moving body and stimulate improvisations in processes that defy fixity and the authority of the written text. This form of engagement with materials and objects is characteristic of contemporary forms of devising. Devising, which defies neat definition or categorisation, is regarded by the authors of *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices* (2007) as

> a process of generating a performative or theatrical event, often but not always in collaboration with others. […] [I]n the USA, this aspect of theatre-making is often described as "collaborative creation" or, in the European tradition, as the product of "creative collectives", both terms that emphasise group interactivity in the process of making a performance. (Govan, Nicholson and Normington 4)

Devising does not hold an overarching theory or a single methodology that might be applied to all contexts, but as a strategy of making a performance, it commonly aims at destabilising the hierarchy of the theatrical elements among various ideological commitments that are associated with this form of creation.[31] Contesting the authority of the word and of the individual creative artist, and by implication, any suggestion of a singular 'truth,' is a common impulse that conditions processes of devising.[32] This impulse in devising, as Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling argue, emerged as a material expression of the political and ideological commitments of the 1950s and 1960s in the West, which include notions such as 'individual and collective rights,' 'self-determination,' 'community,' 'participation' and 'equality.' The political rhetoric of that period was applied to models of devising; making it a desirable mode of practice during that time that brought established and mainstream forms of making performance into question (13, 14). The result was that, '[s]et beside the model of hierarchy, specialisation and increased professionalisation in the mainstream theatre industry, devising as a collaborative process offered a politically acceptable alternative' (Heddon and Milling 17). However, Govan, Nicholson and Normington argue, the vision of devising as 'alternative, oppositional and democratic recalls its avant-garde and radical histories, but by the early 1990s, as [Alison] Oddey acknowledges, this particular form of radicalism was already beginning to wane' (5). The idea of devising as essentially democratic and non-hierarchical has been questioned, for example by Heddon and Milling (5), which is evidenced by many contemporary devising processes led by the figure of the director. Nevertheless, collaboratively creating a performance text remains one of the distinguished features of devising (Govan, Nicholson and Normington 9).

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[31] According to Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, devising (which in Britain, Australia and America stems largely from the late 1950s and 1960s) is variously: 'a social expression of non-hierarchical possibilities; a model of cooperative and non-hierarchical collaboration; an ensemble; a collective; a practical expression of political and ideological commitment; a means of taking control of work and operating autonomously; a de-commodification of art; a commitment to total community; a commitment to total art; the negating of the gap between art and life; the erasure of the gap between spectator and performer; a distrust of words; the embodiment of the death of the author; a means to reflect contemporary social reality; a means to incite social change; an escape from theatrical conventions; a challenge for theatre makers; a challenge for spectators; an expressive, creative language; innovative; risky; inventive; spontaneous; experimental; non-literary' (4-5).

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[32] Govan, Nicholson and Normington argue that '[a]lthough breaking the authority of the written text is not generally held to be a political ideal by contemporary theatre-makers, and many no longer prefer to work in the mainstream, the practice of generating, shaping and editing new material into an original performance remains a central dynamic of devised performance' (6). The work of many contemporary theatre practitioners, including the ones presented in this chapter, display a deliberate attempt to challenge the domination of the written text, not necessarily within the frame of a political ideology, but as a way of enhancing performance practice and activating performers' physical and spatial awareness, not just the emotional or psychological, thus emphasising freedom of expression.

While they do not necessarily show a complete distrust of words or a rejection of the literary text, many contemporary forms of devising approach the material elements of the stage components as stimulus for the creative process; giving authority to the commonly marginal. Alison Oddey in her handbook on devising theatre explains that it ‘can start from anything. It is determined and defined by a group of people who set up an initial framework or structure to explore and experiment with ideas, images, concepts, themes, or specific stimuli that might include music, text, objects, paintings, or movement’ (1). The written text is not necessarily the originator of the work in this form of making theatre, offering an alternative to the dominant literary theatre tradition in which the hierarchical relationship of playwright and director is prevalent.[33] The other components may include objects (created or found; natural or man-made), costumes, photographs, images, lighting, music, sound and audio materials, in addition to environments, sites, places and locations, among many other potential contributors to the mobilisation of the creative process. These are often used within experimentation or improvisatory techniques that foster the possibility of producing free creative expression. Even in cases where the playtext is used as a source, it could be cut up, interrogated, its ‘authorial’ meaning challenged through juxtaposition with image, action, gesture and vocal delivery (Mermikides and Smart 9). In extension, devised performance in its concern with breaking out of conventional modes of practice, particularly the emphasis on hierarchy and specialisation, lead to dramaturgically placing the performance’s material components as equal to the spoken text, paying close attention to the performative potentials and the specific characteristics inherent in those materials.

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[33] As in British post-war theatre that is predominantly text-led, originating with the playwright and emphasising the written word. According to Oddey, during that time ‘[t]he written play script has been the starting point and basis of British theatre production’ (4).

This chapter looks at Improbable; a contemporary British theatre company that adopts a mode of devising in its creative process, in which improvisation is a key practice, and process rather than product is an emphasis. It is a company with a particular interest in the performative aspects of objects as points of departure, fostering a respect for materials as embodying of attitudes that are generative of stories, visual imagery and physical language. It is known for using ‘found or made objects in place of or alongside the performer and always regard the scenographic aspect as a dominant language of performance’ (Mermikides and Smart 8). By observing the company’s understanding of their work with objects and materials, I am proposing a way for understanding and enhancing performance practice, which has implications for our relationship to the self and the other in the context of performance, with the object shifting between being an ‘other’ and being an externalisation of the self. The notion of defamiliarisation, or the Hegelian ‘negation of negation’ mentioned in Chapter Two, will become evident while tracing the movement of materials from the points of familiarity, functionality and direct representation, to the point where they are destabilised.

As a case study, I will focus on the making process of one of the company’s recent collaborative productions. It is the opera *Satyagraha*, written by Constance DeJong and Philip Glass in 1980, restaged by Improbable in collaboration with the English National Opera in London and the Metropolitan Opera in New York. The opera was presented in three separate years in the two locations: in 2007 and 2010 in London, and in 2008 in New York, and the chapter touches on aspects from the three productions simultaneously. Certain parts from the making process will be presented and contextualised, highlighting the fundamental role of objects in generating narratives and scenic elements, in addition to their part in establishing the fundamental principles of a work dynamic between performers. I will specifically follow the journey of the object as a vehicle for play and production in a series of exchanges with the human performer. This journey locates the everyday, found object at its point of departure, showing how it gradually transforms into spectacles loaded with meanings and performance values, in which the functions of the objects go beyond direct representation. As introduced in the previous chapter, the object in that process changes from familiarity (as an everyday, utilitarian object) to theatricality (as an object of estrangement), which counteracts the habituation of perception, and calls attention to the world on stage as a place of artifice.

The emphasis of the analysis is on the stages preceding the final production; in the development and rehearsal spaces, where process, experimentation with material, fluidity of the subject-object boundary, and the role of the object as a mobiliser of action, exchange and creation are in their primary manifestations. This gives a clearer image of what occurs during the interaction between performers and objects before they both go into the final production. Significant moments from the rehearsals and the final production will be mentioned to illustrate specific points in the argument. These will be described in some length in order to give the reader a sense of their context, sequence, progression and impact. I will draw on written accounts of Improbable’s practice; interviews with the company members and with the makers of *Satyagraha*; reviews and rehearsal notes from the three productions; audience’s responses; recorded documentations (video, audio and photographic materials), and my observations and experiences as a participant in all stages of the making, including the final production as a member of a 'Skills Ensemble.' The aim is not to present a comprehensive and chronological account of all stages of the making, nor is it to identify a singular method of working for the company. It was necessary to select from that process the concepts and moments that best demonstrate and respond to the thesis's central ideas, and that emerged throughout the process of making *Satyagraha*, with echoes in the company's larger body of work. This was not an easy task, particularly in such a large-scale and long-running production, with a making process that was multifaceted, complex and non-linear.

The discussion in this chapter is multilayered, moving from the general to the specific. It starts by introducing the company and the production chosen as the main case study. It then moves to the journey of *Satyagraha*'s making. Within that, the focus is gradually narrowed into some of Improbable's key ideas on practice and important aspects of the staging that show the centrality of the object throughout the creative process. This includes the objects' transformational capacities, their shift between familiarity and defamiliarity; between functionality and transgressing it, and by extension, the issue of incorporating the object as non-representational, and engaging with the text as an object of improvisation. The discussion weaves the voices of the makers with my voice as a participant-observer in the making process, along with critical voices, and conceptual and practical notions to help clarify and examine the issues raised.

3.2. Improbable: Making as a Journey

The analogy of the 'journey' is used to describe the process of making *Satyagraha* as I have observed and experienced it over the years. The members of the theatre company Improbable often use that word to describe what happens in a devising process. Phelim McDermott and Julian Crouch argue that '[i]n watching performers improvise with newspapers we see that each performance from beginning to end is a miniature act of creation. How this improvisation is birthed and brought to its conclusion is a whole journey' ('Puppetry'). It is precisely this journey that is the primary focus of this chapter, which is seen as a journey of change and transformation for both people and things, where the life and characteristics of the thing, in Grosz's terms, are incorporated into people's activities. Respect for, and the ability to accommodate the object along that journey produce action and enable practice. The process generated in staging *Satyagraha* evolved as a dialogic exchange between people and objects within a fluid framework that invested in the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar; between the object and the performer, or to return to Grosz's words; a process that 'consists in nothing else than the continuous experimentation with the world of things to produce new things from the fluidity or flux that eludes everyday need, or use value,' which is her interpretation of 'creativity' ('The Thing' 129). This in part is achieved in Improbable's work by taking on the impetus of improvisation, emphasising the elements of play and spontaneity in cultivating the possibility of producing meanings and creative expression.

Improbable is a theatre company that embraces ideas of transformation, openness, exploration and the connections between art and life among its ongoing work ethos. Founded in 1996 by Julian Crouch, Phelim McDermott, Lee Simpson and producer Nick Sweeting, Improbable adopts a mode of non-hierarchical collaborative creation in making performance that 'epitomises the new formation of the professional devising company' (Heddon and Milling 186). The company's structure allows its core members to pursue their work, either together, sharing and exchanging their roles, or independently, often with performers and creative collaborators brought in for each performance. Coming from backgrounds in performing arts, acting, improvisation, stand-up comedy, comedy improvisation, design, mask and puppet making, the company members produce diverse and hybrid work that incorporates different expressive mediums and performance skills to produce engaging and thought-provoking theatrical language.[34] They produce work that ranges between object animation, puppetry, theatrical biographies, site-specific performances, visual theatre, musicals, opera, open-space events, theatrical adaptations or entirely devised performances, and they try to remain open and receptive to new mediums. In this way, the company creates performances for a wide range of venues and spaces; from very small-scale puppet theatres to mainhouse repertory houses to outdoor large-scale spectacles. As Lee Simpson puts it, 'Improbable is about changing the scale and not making stuff for the same place' (Simpson, Interview).

Openness and fluidity attained through live improvisation on stage form a key part of all of Improbable's making and performing (Simpson, Interview).

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[34] Lee Simpson came through drama school and comedy improvisation, he is a member of the Comedy Store Players. Phelim McDermott completed a Performing Arts degree at Middlesex Polytechnic in 1985, after which he co-founded dereck, dereck Productions with Julia Bardsley (1985-1989) (*Improbable*). Julian Crouch was a mask and puppet maker and a designer who worked with Trickster Theatre Company and Welfare State International. Simpson and McDermott worked together since around 1986-7 on improvised performances in various repertory theatres (Simpson). McDermott and Crouch started a creative partnership in 1992 in *Doctor Faustus* at the Nottingham Playhouse before eventually forming a company. As a company, Improbable has, to date, produced *70 Hill Lane* (1996), *Animo* (1996), *Lifegame* (1998-2004, 2010), *Coma* (1999), *Spirit* (2000), *The Hanging Man* (2003) and *Panic* (2008, 2009). In different forms of collaborations with other co-directors or producing companies, Improbable produced *Cinderella* (1998), *Shockheaded Peter* (1998), *Sticky* (1999), *Theatre of Blood* (2005), *Stars are Out Tonight* (2005), *The Wolves in the Walls* (2006) and *Satyagraha* (2007, 2008, 2010, 2011), in addition to facilitating a series of Open Space events since 2005.

Although not all performances are entirely dependent on improvisation, a space is always kept open for unplanned or unfinished work as a way of keeping the performance event fresh and vital. In the makers' words:

> Sometimes our shows are totally improvised, sometimes they are devised through improvisation, sometimes they are improvised and become fixed, sometimes they are a script which is improvised with. The common thread is the spirit with which they are performed. A scripted show should feel as alive and vital as a totally improvised show. We sometimes don't know which of these the show will be at the start of a process. ('Improbable Principles')

Preserving fluidity throughout the making process and during the work's life on stage allows the audience to play an active part in the creation and reception of the work, which is one of Improbable's main concerns; to invite the audience into the work. This is what they refer to as having a 'gap' through which the audience imaginatively enters the performance and participates in the theatre event. It is the opposite of producing work that is 'complete,' closed, or that dictates to the audience ways of interpretation. Involving the audience as authors creates a relationship of reciprocity that activates their roles as contributors, as McDermott and Crouch argue, it is 'only through the conspiracy of the players and the audience to play together that this becomes possible' ('Puppetry'). The 'gap' could be in the set, a material or an object that can easily represent something else, or it could even be an 'open' quality that a performer has (McDermott and Crouch, 'Puppetry'). It is 'a gap between what you're saying it is, and what you're seeing' (McDermott, 'Dreaming'). This concept is integral to the company's work and that signifies the openness of interpretation and the transformation of theatrical signs characteristic of their productions. Entertaining the possibility of presenting 'unfinished' work demonstrates a readiness to integrate or reflect audience response (Heddon and Milling 21). Through the engagement with physical materials and the incompleteness of representation, the receiver is provoked to renegotiate her/his stock relationship to familiar objects and notions. This idea is fundamental to the making of *Satyagraha* and how the production elements were negotiated throughout the process, including the images, the material elements, the text and the music. Openness and instability of representation characterised all stages of production becoming their primary underlining principle.

Improbable's idea of the 'gap' holds echoes of the Brechtian impulse of subverting the audience's passive experience, renegotiating their relationship to their realities. Defamiliarising the ordinary in the company's work compels spectators to counteract the habituation of perception, and to use their imagination to fill in the gaps of the world created on stage. That is why they often deliberately leave a performance unfinished 'so that the audience have a strong input into the creation of a show,' sometimes leaving parts to be created for the first time in front of the audience ('Improbable Principles'). *Shockheaded Peter* (1998), for example, never had a run-through before it was in front of an audience, claims Julian Crouch (Crouch, et. al.). Even *Satyagraha*, in spite of its production within the conditions of 'an operatic culture dominated by publicists, corporate sponsors, singers with international careers and perversely capricious directors who are bored with the classics' as some may claim (Conrad), resisted rigidity and maintained the sense of fluidity in both process and product important to Improbable. A reviewer compared it to a 'sculpture, one can see it in infinite terms' (Rolnick). Aspects of the production were left incomplete, or to be created in a flowing, ephemeral journey that keeps the performance 'alive' and engaging. The emphasis on process over product responds to an impulse to resist commodification and to enable connections between life and art.

After briefly introducing the subject of the opera in the next section, the chapter focuses on its staging. As a way of illuminating and leading the reader to what underlies that process and its dynamic, the chapter in the following touches on some of the fundamental notions in Improbable's work ethos. The idea of the 'accidental' discoveries is key to their work process that is often raised in their discussions on practice. It conditions many of the company's creative decisions in *Satyagraha* as well as in other productions. The chapter then looks at how this leads to a series of scenic transformations on stage, which is enhanced by the ability to accept and reveal the object's embedded material features. It then demonstrates some practical applications of these notions in moments from the creative process.

3.3. *Satyagraha*: Gandhi's Call for Action

Satyagraha is an opera in three acts composed by the contemporary American composer Philip Glass, with a libretto co-written by Glass and the American artist, writer and playwright Constance DeJong. It was originally commissioned by the city of Rotterdam, Netherlands, and was first performed at the Stadsschouwburg (Municipal Theatre) there in September 1980. The opera is loosely based on the life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, particularly his early years in South Africa between 1893 and 1914. It was during that time that Gandhi developed his ideas on non-violent resistance to injustice in response to the mistreatment of the Indian population and the discrimination directed against them in South Africa at the time. Confronted by stark signs of discrimination from the moment he first arrived in South Africa, the realities of the social, political and economic injustices facing his fellow Indians became painfully manifest to Gandhi.[35] The prejudiced treatment of Indians provoked Gandhi to question his people's status within the British Empire and his own place in society, which initiated his subsequent social activism. Driven by this impulse, Gandhi led a series of collective actions and forms of peaceful protest throughout his twenty-one years in South Africa. These actions aimed at shaking the hegemonic systems of colonial rule and reshaping the Indian community of South Africa into a homogeneous political force against injustice and discrimination. This included establishing the newspaper *Indian Opinion* in 1903, setting up a communal, cooperative farm in Natal in 1904, and forcing South African General Jan Christiaan Smuts to negotiate a compromise with Gandhi regarding the Transvaal government's Act that compels registration of the colony's Indian population in 1906 (Paruchuri). During that stage of Gandhi's struggle, his concept of 'Satyagraha' gradually evolved. The Sanskrit word *satya* means 'truth,' which for Gandhi implies love, while *agraha* means 'firmness,' which serves as a synonym for force. Therefore 'Satyagraha' reflects 'the Force which is born of Truth of Love or non-violence' (Gandhi 150), replacing the inaccurate phrase 'passive resistance.' The principle of 'non-violence resistance unto death' that Gandhi advocated is far from passivity, but it is a source of immense strength and action. The still maturing concept of Satyagraha was adopted by Gandhi for the first time at a mass protest meeting in Johannesburg in 1906 while calling on his fellow Indians to defy the new registration Act and to suffer the consequences, rather than resisting through violent means (Paruchuri).

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[35] At his arrival to South Africa, Gandhi, who held a valid first-class train ticket, was thrown off a first-class train carriage for refusing to move to a third-class coach. Traveling farther on by stagecoach, he was beaten by a driver for refusing to travel on the footboard to make room for a European passenger. He suffered other hardships on the journey, including being barred from several hotels. In another incident, the magistrate of a Durban court ordered Gandhi to remove his turban, which he refused to do (Paruchuri).

Those twenty-one years of Gandhi’s life, seen as the essential years for the tools of Satyagraha to be shaped, and for Gandhi’s new personality to be invented, are the subjects of Glass’s opera. Glass describes them as ‘the quintessential years, the moments of birth, struggle and promise’ (DeJong and Glass 8). Gandhi’s ideas and his example that materialised and evolved in those years, rather than an obsession with the man himself, inspired the composer and found kinship with his own political commitments of the 1960s (Rockwell 410). The increasingly violent political and social landscape of the late 1970s drove Glass to think about men like Gandhi who established ideas of social change and non-violence, which is a topic that remains pressingly relevant today with the growing violence in the contemporary world (Glass, Interview 66). *Satyagraha* became part of a trilogy of operas by Glass about men who changed the world through their ideas and teachings in the spheres of science, politics and religion, which includes *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) and *Akhnaten* (1983); or what Glass calls the ‘portrait operas’ (Rockwell 411).

In terms of subject matter and structure, *Satyagraha* defies the conventional forms of the opera medium. It does not follow a linear progression of narrative, a chronological order of events nor a dramatic arc, which are predominant characteristics in forms of mainstream Western drama such as opera. The focus in the opera is on six major episodes from Gandhi’s time in South Africa, each represented in a scene. They start with the setting up of the communal Tolstoy Farm in 1910; then they move to the vow that Indians took collectively in 1906 to oppose the imposed registration ordinance. The opera then goes back to the moment when Gandhi was attacked by an angry mob in South Africa in 1896 to be rescued by the wife of the police superintendent. Then it moves forward again to the publication of *Indian Opinion* in 1906; to the collective burning of registration cards in protest in 1908; ending with the New Castle March of 1913 as the closing event of the Satyagraha movement in South Africa, and which led to the repeal of several laws restricting the rights of Indian-born residents there.

The opera, as DeJong and Glass wrote it, opens with a mythological scene on the eve of a great battle between two branches of the Kuruva royal family derived from the *Mahabharata*. The implications of this feud are reflected in a dialogue between Prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna, through which the teachings and philosophy of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the source of the vocal text in *Satyagraha*, are presented, especially on weighing the merits of war and peace, and in reflecting on the nature and purpose of action. A parallel is created between the mythical and the historical; that is between the impending battle in the *Bhagavad-Gita* and Gandhi's struggle with his next course of action in response to duty's call (whether to return back to India after being mistreated by the authorities, or to stay in South Africa and persist with his task). Thus the spoken dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna in Act I, Scene 1 is echoed in Gandhi's text in that opening sequence, and the battle is revealed in the staging as one that occurs between two opposing armies of Indians and Europeans (DeJong and Glass 38). In a symbolic time frame, the twenty-one years are set within a single day; beginning at dawn's breaking in Scene 1, with subsequent scenes distributed over the daylight hours, and the final act occurring from dusk into the night (DeJong and Glass 43). Each of the opera's three acts has a figurative counterpart overseeing the action on a level above the stage. They are chosen for their links with Gandhi's life and ideas. These are the characters of Leo

Tolstoy in Act I, who was an inspirational figure in forming Gandhi’s ideas about non-violence; Rabindranath Tagore in Act II, the poet and scholar and Gandhi’s contemporary who gave him advice and encouragement throughout his life; and Martin Luther King, Jr. in Act III, who furthered the premise of non-violence in the American civil rights movement. According to Glass’s staging notes, ‘[t]heir presence as witnesses on a level above establishes a temporal relationship with the staged events below and suggests the historical continuity of Satyagraha’ (DeJong and Glass 43). They are representatives of Satyagraha’s past, present and future (DeJong and Glass 43).

3.4. The Beginning of the Journey: The ‘Skills Ensemble’

The making journey of *Satyagraha* effectively started in 2006 with a puppet making and construction period, followed by a three-week ‘research and development’ period at the Hangar circus space in London before the start of the actual rehearsals at the English National Opera’s rehearsal studios in 2007. Particularly the three weeks of research and development were crucial for creating the foundation of the staging and for building an ensemble-based method of working. It is the time when Improbable’s way of working and their thoughts on working with objects and physical materials were most vividly communicated, with a minimal direct interference from the larger theatre institution. The main aim of the research and development period was to explore and experiment with ways of creating images and narratives using the main vocabulary of the piece (such as the music, objects and movement forms). One of the early decisions of the making was to employ an ensemble of twelve non-singing performers to create and mobilise the imagery, the objects and the figures in the opera throughout the scenes; they were named the ‘Skills Ensemble.’[36] The main intention was to stage the whole opera through people working together to create spectacles by human-led means, even in the most technologically demanding images, which shows an affinity to the handmade aesthetics of popular theatre and to the power of group work. The detail and care shown in the craft of the work speaks of the company’s reverence for work that is not technological or machine-driven in essence, but that is human and artist-driven; a quality that can be seen in other productions such as the vaudevillian ‘junk opera’ *Shockheaded Peter*. The seemingly rough-hewn, handmade quality evident in *Satyagraha*’s puppetry and scenic design shows a fondness for the discarded and marginalised material remains of human life, exploring their possibilities of acquiring another, broader life.

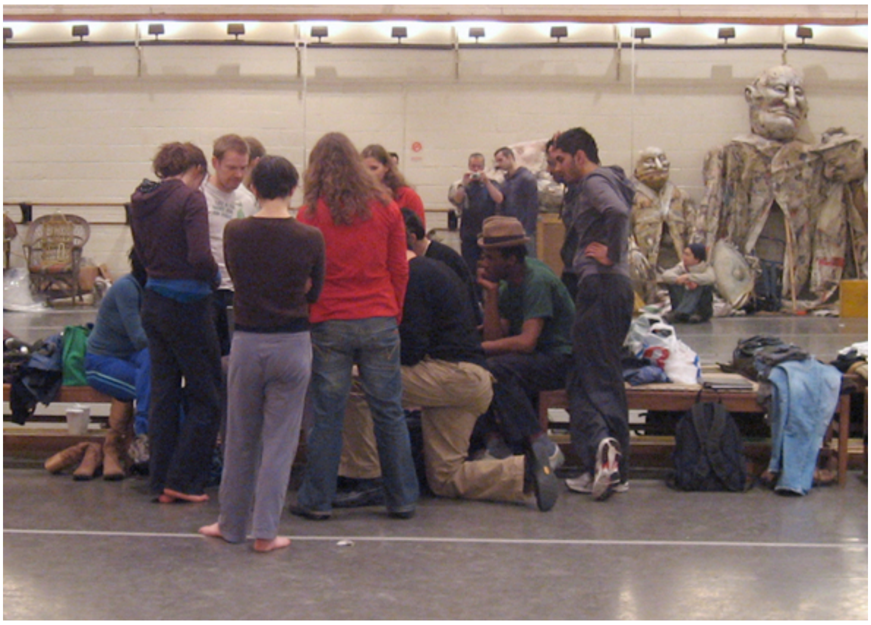

Fig. 1. The 'Skills Ensemble' during rehearsals. The Metropolitan Opera, New York (2008)
Photo by Robert Thirtle.[37]

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[36] I became part of that ensemble in the first production in 2007, as well as in the following revivals in 2008 and 2010.

[37] All of the images of *Satyagraha*’s creative process and production are courtesy of Improbable, the ENO, the Metropolitan Opera, and photographers Robert Workman and Robert Thirtle.

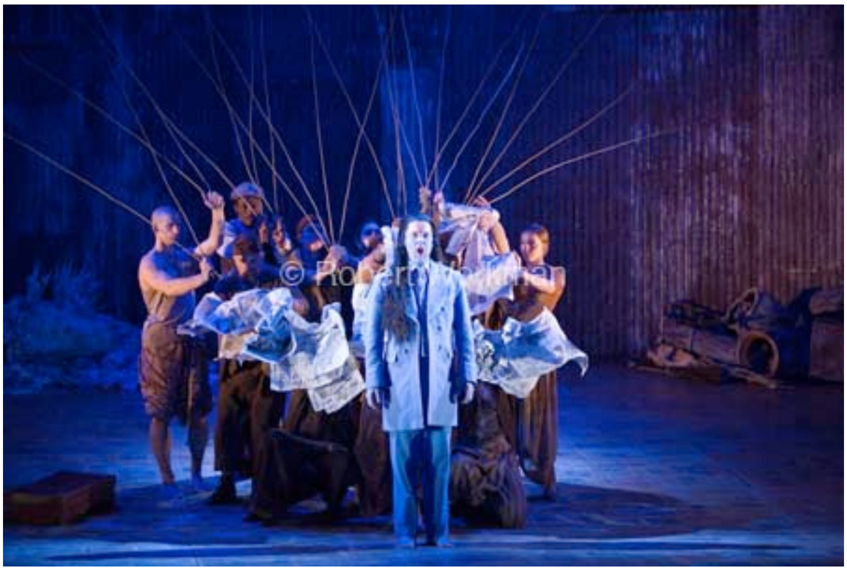
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Fig. 2. Act I, Scene 1. ENO, London (2007). Photo by Robert Workman

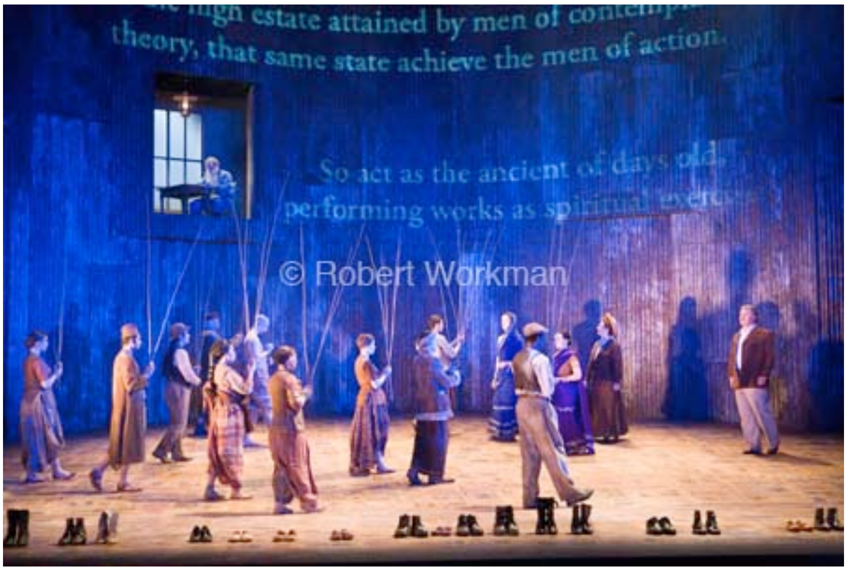
high estate attained by men of contemp
theory, that same state achieve the men of action.
So act as the ancient of days old,
performing works as spiritual exerc
© Robert Workman

Fig. 3. Act I, Scene 2. ENO, London (2007). Photo by Robert Workman

The ‘eclectic’ group of performers of the Skills Ensemble was brought together from diverse backgrounds: acting, puppetry, circus, design and even stage management. Their presence in the production was marked by fluidity and ‘non-specialisation,’ constantly shifting between being actors, puppeteers, stage hands; being visible and ‘invisible;’ at the margins of the events but also their mobilising centre; following Gandhi and also passing paper stones to his opponents; presenting characters (Tolstoy, Tagore or King) or just being themselves as persons; representing a group of 'untouchables,' and also transcending this status.[38] Robert Thirtle, a member of the Ensemble, describes the group's onstage presence as the following: 'we are seen, but then we disappear back into the rubbish, we almost merge back into the set. So visibility and invisibility. And I think that also relates to those members of society who have been somehow pushed to the periphery, which in South Africa was the case with Indian workers' (Interview).

The Ensemble's group performance in the opera established connections to Gandhi's movement and his philosophy of collective action, particularly its emphasis on people taking responsibility for themselves and their cause. They are seen as more than extras or stagehands, but they are 'witnesses of this story, we are witnesses of this historical event and witnesses of this theatrical ritual' (Thirtle, Interview). In order to achieve this symbolic presence, casting the members of the ensemble was conditioned by how they work together as a group, more than by their technical skills. As designer Julian Crouch commented, in the end, the performance is ‘about the relationship between the people, not just the images’ (Research and Development). Therefore, it was important for the company that the dynamic of working among the Ensemble performers to be established and strengthened from an early stage, which was one of the main aims of the research and development period. The objects were integral to this process, eventually becoming part of that ensemble.

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[38] In casting the members of the Skills Ensemble, co-directors McDermott and Crouch preferred not to employ a full group of 'skilled' puppeteers. As will be demonstrated further throughout this chapter, working with objects for Improbable does not place great emphasis on puppetry as a specialist skill exclusive to experts, which is an attitude that distinguishes their practice from traditional forms of puppetry. The 'newspaper exercise' presented later below, for instance, does not aim to create 'good' puppets. The company members seem to have a wary attitude towards the idea of 'skill' in puppetry. As they put it, 'when we have worked with trained puppeteers the biggest stumbling block to creating a great ensemble or a complete show has been those very skills which trained puppeteers have. […] [W]hat we are looking for is what we would call "metaskills" - these are feeling skills and attitudes which lie beneath any technical skills a performer may have as a puppeteer, improviser or actor' ('Puppetry'). To achieve the dynamic of working they aspire for, they are more concerned with humility in a performer in addition to skill, rather than a showing off of skill, as a fundamental trait for working with people and with materials. This contributed significantly to the noticeably successful work relationship between the members of the Ensemble in *Satyagraha,* and which had a positive impact on the work dynamic in the two opera establishments in London and New York. In addition to being a 'smart way' of dealing with the technical and visual sides of the opera (Crouch, Interview), having the 'Skills' became one of the most popular features of the opera (along with the big puppets) that attracted admiration among spectators and those involved in the making, including backstage workers. *Satyagraha* became associated with 'The Skills.' Their presence added a 'human' dimension to the stages of making, which opera workers often miss in their interaction with opera performers. In choosing them, Crouch believed that 'you just have to trust that the people are going to be the right people' (Interview).

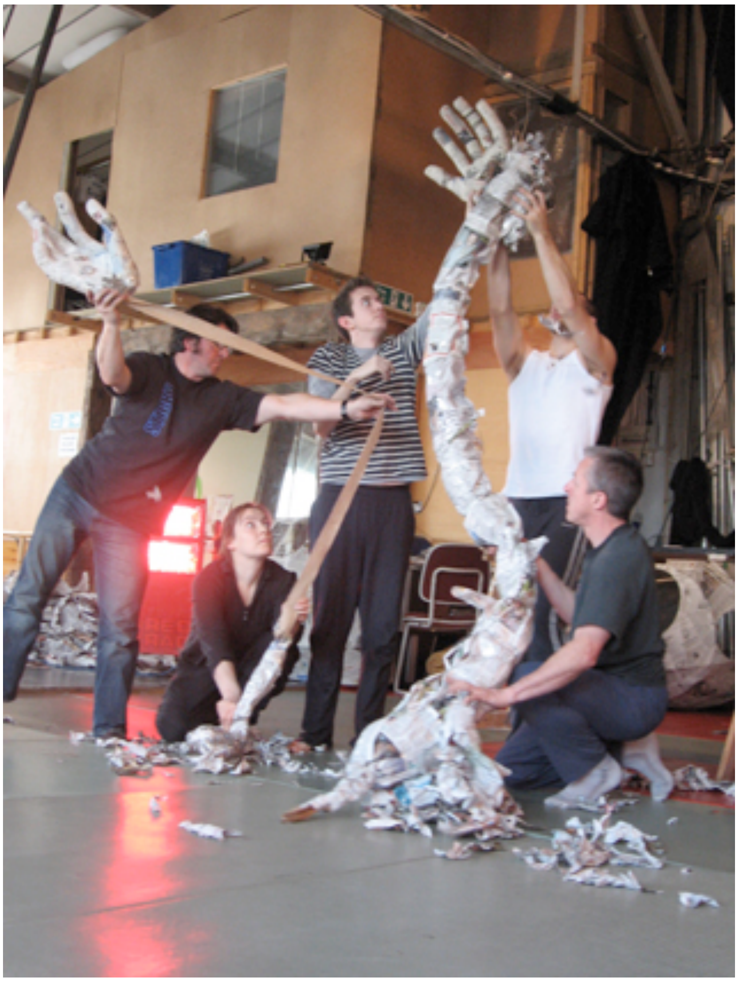

Fig. 4. Research and Development. The Hangar Circus Space, London (2006)
Photo by Nesreen Hussein

The presence of the object as the starting point of the collaborative process provided a point of access into the process and created spaces through which others can contribute. For Crouch as a designer, having materials ‘gives others a way in, and I don’t think theatre design should be about the designer, or the director or one actor, it should be about everyone’ (Interview). From the start, the Ensemble performers were invited to take part in constructing the figures and the objects used in the opera, dedicating special time to these making sessions during the rehearsals. Performers took part in amending and creating parts of the puppets they worked with. Even though this process was overseen by Crouch, who established the visual style of the production and led the construction of the puppets,[39] a space was left for others to contribute and add details of their own, which enabled them to attain a sense of responsibility and authorship towards their products of labour. The Ensemble’s role in the construction emphasised the importance of the shared activity of making, even when it is not directly connected to performing, but that is improvisatory and playful in other ways.

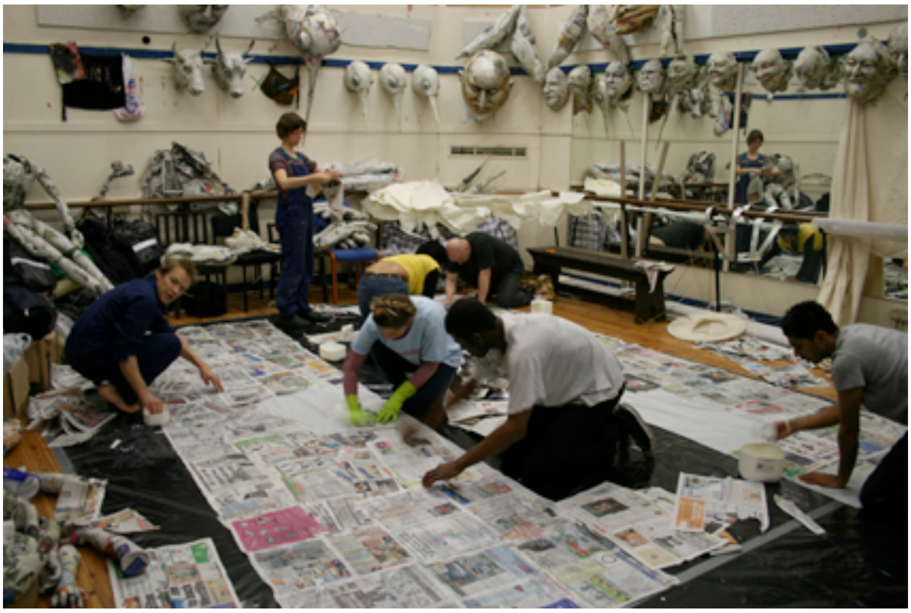

Fig. 5. A making session with the Skills Ensemble. ENO, London (2007). Photo by Nesreen Hussein

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[39] Crouch created most of the puppets’ heads, which he considers as the most important part in a figure. He believes that in constructing a puppet, ‘pretty much all you need is the head, and in a way that’s why I make the heads, and that’s why I let the Skills Ensemble make the bodies, because I knew that it didn’t matter with the bodies. […] The head is like the control, it’s my control part of that image, and then the body is like the playing part’ (Interview). Thus, the contribution of the Ensemble towards making the puppets was largely conditioned by Crouch’s vision, visual style and distinctive aesthetic.

Taking part in creating the puppets and all the other figures was a way of building work principles that bound the group together and to the objects with which they performed. The making sessions gave birth to a sense of self-sufficiency in a process analogous to a ritualistic activity in its capacity to bind people under a sense of community and a shared objective. In those important moments of group creation, the objects became products of externalisation where performers 'invested' themselves in the act of creating. Objectification in this instance functions as a mode of a subject's development, and the object becomes generative of social relations. In a Hegelian sense, performers' self-recognition as creators became emphasised in the process. The objects ended up being the product of the community of performers that productively externalised the forces of their subjective and creative labour. As a result of this method of making, the Skills Ensemble gradually established themselves as a self-sustained group of performers, extending their responsibilities to include making and amending puppets; taking part in devising aspects of their performance; and sustaining their own training and organisation system.[40] They formed a tight unity that distinguished them from the work dynamic of the singers. Thus they fulfilled the role imagined for them by the directors without an apparent sense of an imposed directorial authorship. This enabled the group to sustain their attitude as a tight Ensemble throughout all the three productions, and it became difficult to replace any of its members. The Skills Ensemble will be mentioned throughout the discussion in this chapter as the performers of the exercises and scenes described.

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[40] The member of the Ensemble, Robert Thirtle, took the role of reviving the movement and puppetry for the group during the 2010 production in London.

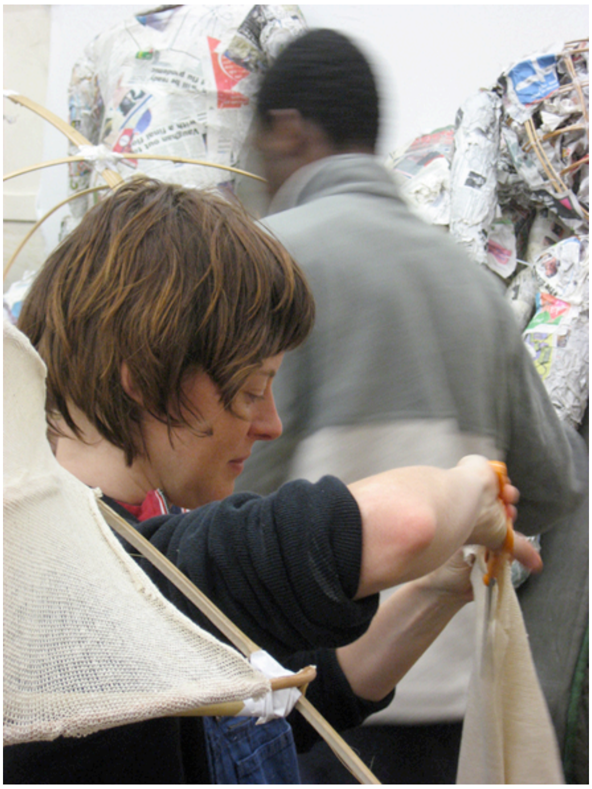

Fig. 6. A making session with the Skills Ensemble. ENO, London (2007)
Photo by Nesreen Hussein

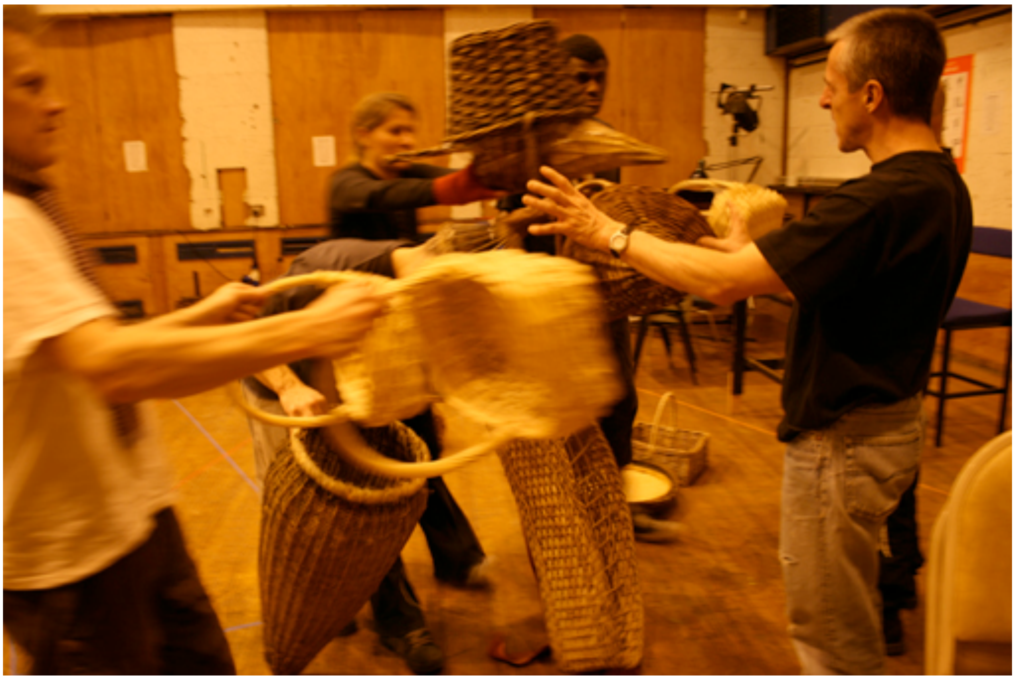

Fig. 7. The Skills Ensemble devising a figure's construction and transformation. ENO, London (2007)
Photo by Nesreen Hussein

3.5. The Staging: Making by 'Accident'

In the staging of the opera, described as 'one of the most fantastically beautiful spectacles ever presented on this stage, charged with a poetic richness of imagination' (Christiansen), Glass gave full authority to the co-directors from Improbable, Phelim McDermott and Julian Crouch, without interfering with any of their creative decisions. As he states, 'I wasn't interested in advising them. I was more interested in what they do. […] I didn't want to stand in the way of anything that would come to them' (Interview 66). Deemphasising the authority of the composer supported the company's freedom of interpretation; a freedom that was enhanced by the non-linearity of the libretto and the non-dramatic music that did not dictate a specific approach to the staging. Consequently, the narrative of the staging emerged from diverse and unpredictable sources beyond the written text itself. The narrative was gradually found in a non-linear, physical process that is movement- and image-based rather than discursive, in a journey of finding things out through play and action.

By drawing on improvisations, games and exercises with objects and fellow performers in the space, many of the images, movements and actions became generated without relying on prescribed choreography. The journey of discoveries and interactions with the source material started the process of making and progressed until the moment of production on stage. Oddey suggests that a devising process often begins with

> the interaction between the members of a group and the starting point or stimulus chosen. The group absorbs the source material, responds to it, and then generates a method of working appropriate to the initial aims of the company and project. […] Ultimately, it is about the

> group discovering a relationship between itself and the product it produces. (24)

The members of Improbable often declare that as a company, they do not have one absolute, clear, method of working. It is rather a fluid process that changes all the time (Crouch, et. al.). They consider that '[e]very project is different, and we don't know what we'll do before we start, so we have no fixed way of working' (Simpson, Interview). This comment is common among practitioners who produce work through devising: that their methods of working cannot be defined or pinned down.[41] Indeed, Improbable's work is constantly shifting and evolving, kept open to new urges, seeking new collaborations, and regenerating their structures of working as a company.[42] Collaborating with large theatre establishments, such as the English National Opera and the Metropolitan Opera, pushes the company to create work that is more defined than their own smaller-scale productions that tend to remain loose and unfinished until they are in front of an audience. This has to do with the expectations and demands of the establishment they collaborate with, as Crouch puts it, 'I do more on operas than what I would do on a little show. So a whole lot depends on who you are collaborating with and what kind of people they are' (Interview). At the start of *Satyagraha* rehearsals, McDermott declared that they usually know much less when they work on Improbable's smaller productions. They get in a room, improvise, and see what will come out, while in *Satyagraha*, the work is both fixed in some parts and also kept open to the unknown in others (London Rehearsal Notes, 2007).

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[41] Theatre de Complicite have continually attempted to resist the ossification of their work and devising processes, insisting that there is no formula (Heddon and Milling 180).

[42] In the past few years, some of the company members have been extensively producing work in the USA, including touring productions, operas and Broadway musicals, which led to a geographical shift in the direction of their work. Therefore, the structure of the company is currently evolving to accommodate this shift.

However, a through-line remains fundamentally consistent in the company's work whatever its scale, which is expressed in Oddy's description to some extent. In part, interacting with physical materials and objects is important as a starting point and as a stimulus, staying open to how they can contribute to a devising process, or what the objects 'do' and how they 'speak,' as the makers put it (McDermott, 'Dreaming'). All of the company's productions start with improvisations with objects as a way of gaining access to a piece of work, and also to nurture a group-work approach, or what is often described as a 'sense of ensemble.' Simpson asserts that '[i]n doing improvisation on stage, the mechanisms are the same as in the rehearsal. For example, we start with newspapers, we do that in rehearsal, we teach that in workshops. Really we never rehearse, we only make theatre. Rehearsals are making all the time' (Simpson, Interview). The company's rehearsal process is analogous to a workshop format with its concern with exploration, experimentation and discovery, as opposed to pinning things down or progressing in a linear direction. It is an ongoing process of learning about a piece, about themselves and about each other that goes into the opening night.

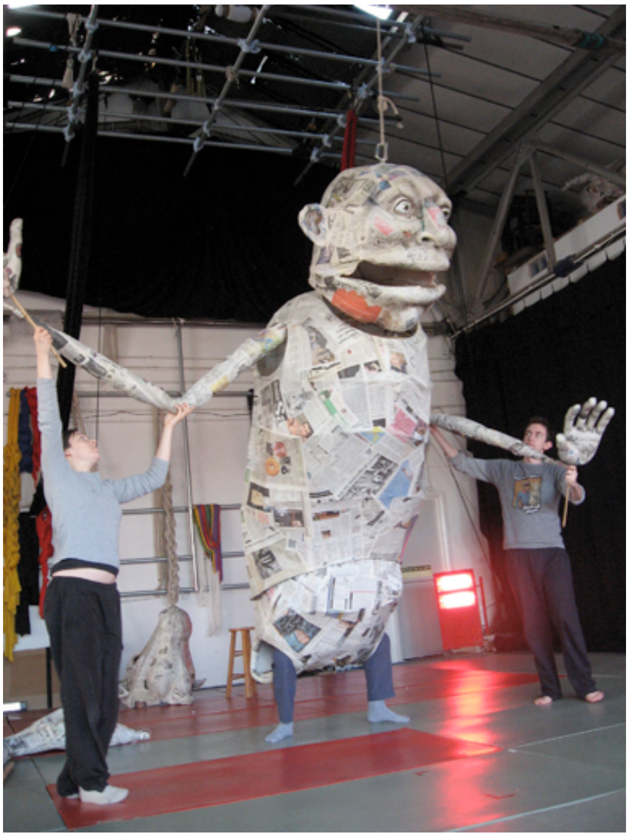

Fig. 8. Improvising during Research and Development. The Hangar Circus Space, London (2006)
Photo by Nesreen Hussein

In building a piece together, they often start with an idea without foreseeing its full implications at the beginning. 'In making a piece there is the sense of following something and not quite knowing what it is until it presents itself' (McDermott, 'Dreaming'). *Spirit* (2000), for example, started from an idea on war and conflict, and what they ended up working on was their own personal and internal conflicts (McDermott, 'Dreaming'). Trusting the 'unexpected' and being receptive to what it may lead to is one of the guiding principles that conditions many of their creative decisions, not least in making *Satyagraha*. Embracing the unknown is evident in their common reference to the 'accidental' discoveries; that the best discoveries are in the mistakes or that happen outside of the laboratory (what they call 'in the breaks'). The skill, therefore, is in noticing those accidents in time and incorporating them in the process. Crouch describes his designing process in general as ‘a funny process, because it’s not simple, I mean everything happens at the same time when you’re designing, and some of it happens by accident.’ It is a complex process where ideas ‘don’t all come at once, they come in certain layers, and then they lead you somewhere else. […] And a lot is often accidental, but the skill is in being alert enough to spot the gold in the accident’ (Interview).

‘Accident’ and ‘chance’ are common notions for theatre companies across the various types of devising practice. Heddon and Milling argue that ‘[a]gain and again, companies report that they “just knew” when an image was appropriate, or when they had hit upon an idea, movement, phrase or sequence that “felt right”’ (10). The idea of intuition as a structuring element of the improvisation processes for those companies is often mentioned, which holds true for Improbable. Crouch recalls how a lot of his design decisions happen by chance or how they are conditioned by improvisation. For example in *Satyagraha*, at the beginning of Act II, Scene 1 (‘Confrontation and Rescue’), a projected image of a ship, supposedly carrying Gandhi, enters from stage left, slides across the set’s back wall, and stops centre stage where a door slides open in the set to reveal Gandhi descending it. The initial idea was to build that ship, which was going to be costly. But it was discovered by chance, with the help of the video designers, that the images of Crouch’s design drawings make a powerful effect when they are projected along that back wall, and this is how the scene of the arrival of the ship to South Africa was realised in the end (Crouch, Interview). Crouch also recalls his frustration when he started to think about the design of the set, but playing with a large piece of corrugated cardboard and bending it in a big circle gave him the idea of the circular back wall of the set, which is shaped as an arena reminiscent of the enclosure and violence of prisons or fighting grounds (Interview).[43]

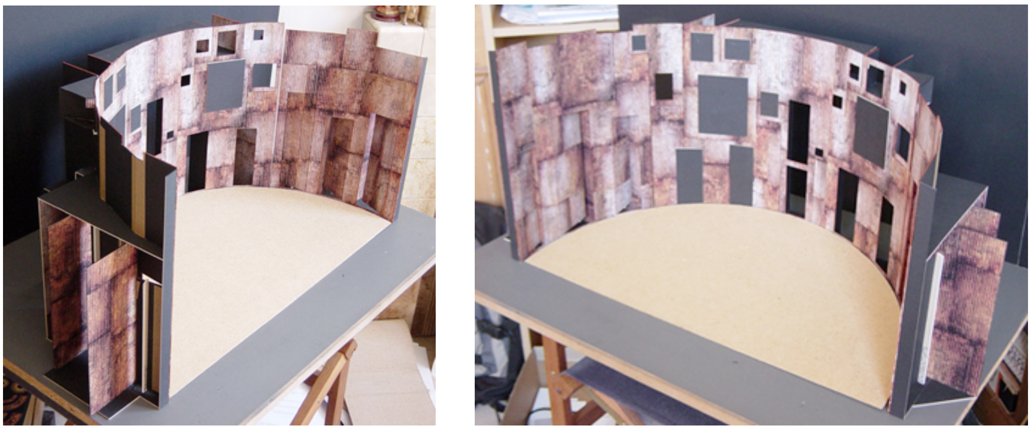

Fig. 9. *Satyagraha*'s set model. Designed by Julian Crouch. Made and photographed by Robert Thirtle

At the same time, and as in the rest of Heddon and Milling's argument, the idea of intuition functions paradoxically within improvisation in the devising process. Improvisation 'is always already conditioned by the mannerisms, physical abilities and training, horizons of expectation and knowledge, patterns of learned behaviour of the performers' (10). Moments of intuitive recognition are conditioned by embodied history and established modes of practice. This is also confirmed by Mermikides and Smart who believe that devising processes will often be deliberately structured in order to include chance and serendipity. As they put it, '[t]he apparently spontaneous inspirations that such strategies provoke often emerge from the creators' heightened sense of awareness and a general openness to environment and to the devising group' (25). When examined in depth, it appears that such instances of intuitive discoveries are often a product of a creator's underlying train of thought, search for a solution to a problem or a product of memory. Crouch himself recognises that many of his ‘accidental’ decisions may not be by chance after all, but could be a matter of inevitable progression of a certain process, or a matter of ‘borrowing’ from other of his previous works. He gives the following example.

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[43] I will look at further aspects of the design process at various points throughout the following discussions.

Before working on *Satyagraha*, Crouch was working on a project based on the puppet characters Punch and Judy, which got aborted temporarily because of other urgent commitments. But Punch still found its way into the opera. One of the large puppets that appear in ‘Confrontations and Rescue’ scene is actually based on the characteristics of Punch.

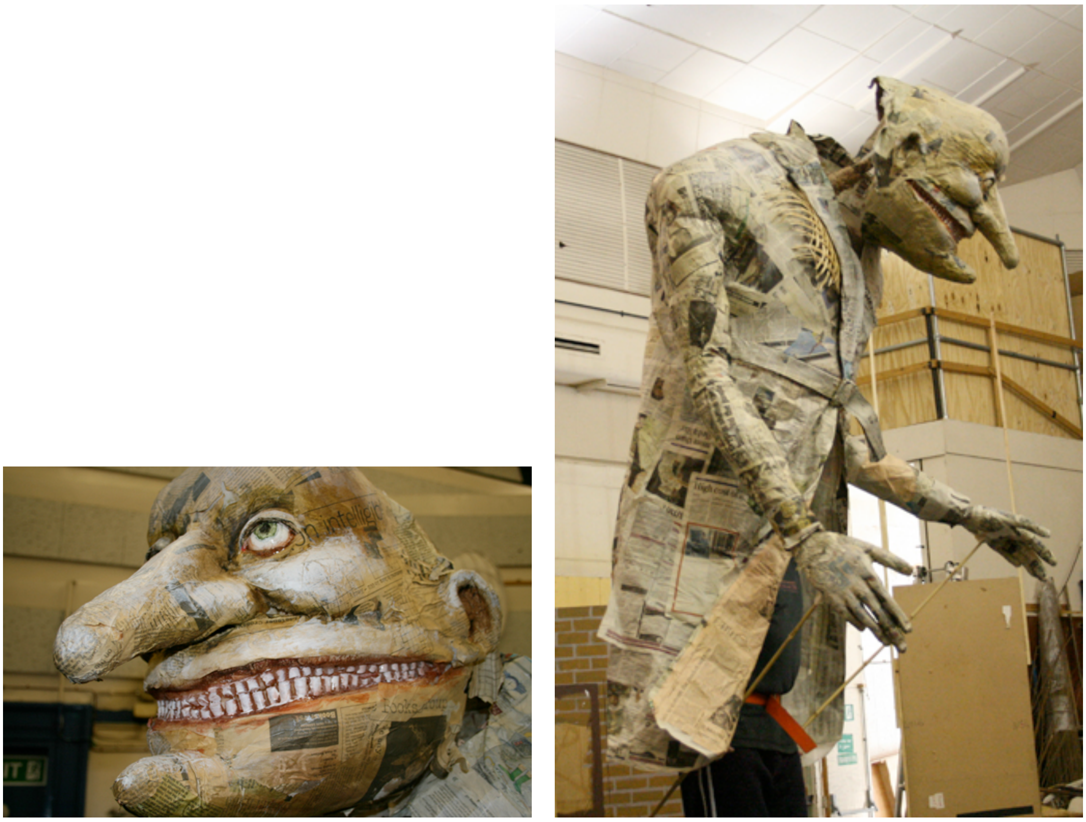

Fig. 10. *Satyagraha* rehearsals. ENO, London (2007). Photos by Nesreen Hussein

Another puppet with a crocodile head makes a brief appearance at the beginning of Act I, Scene 3 (‘The Vow’), which is also derived from Punch and Judy characters.

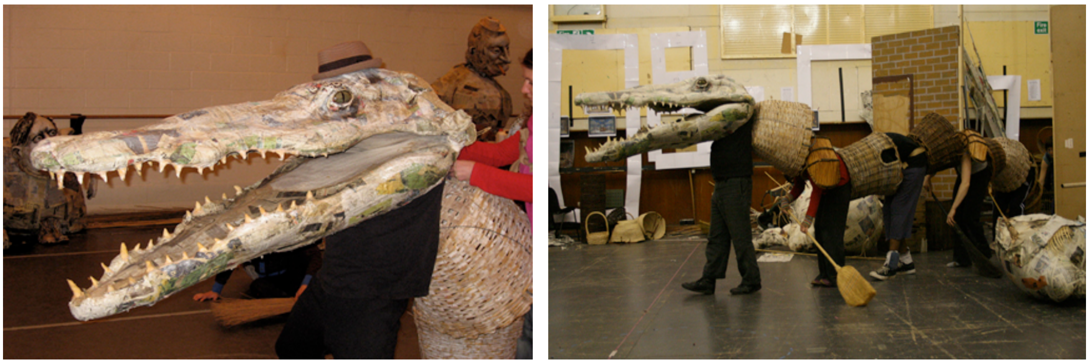

Fig. 11. *Satyagraha* rehearsals. ENO, London (2007). Photos by Nesreen Hussein

Moreover, Crouch considers the appearance of the large grotesque puppets in Act II, Scene 1 as a tribute to his street theatre work with Bread and Puppet Theater and Welfare State International (Public Talk). As he asserts, ‘ideas come from old shows and actually a lot by chance you just drag something in’ and if proved successful, it gets integrated into the work (Interview). The same goes for other Improbable productions where parts of earlier productions, pieces of sets, objects, puppets or even discarded ideas make a comeback. *Shockheaded Peter*, for example, was created on a low budget; so instead of building a whole new set, various scenic elements were collected together from previous productions (McDermott and Crouch, ‘Puppetry’). Poor materials, such as newspaper and adhesive tape (commonly known as selloptape or sticky tape), appear regularly in Improbable’s work, becoming the company’s trademark, as I will show below. Lines of sticky tape stretched by the performers across the width of the stage in front of the audience in Act III of *Satyagraha* are then gathered and transformed into a large ethereal figure that moves on stage for a few minutes with the aid of aerialist Tina Koch, stilt walkers Charlotte Mooney and Alex Harvey, and ground-based performers Charlie

Llewellyn-Smith, Caroline Partridge and Dharmesh Patel.[44] The figure's body is then raised above the stage and moulded into a glittery sphere that hovers in the air and disappears above the set along with the aerialist who is carrying it. This scene echoes an earlier one in *70 Hill Lane* (1996) that involves a similar transformation of sticky tape but on a smaller scale.

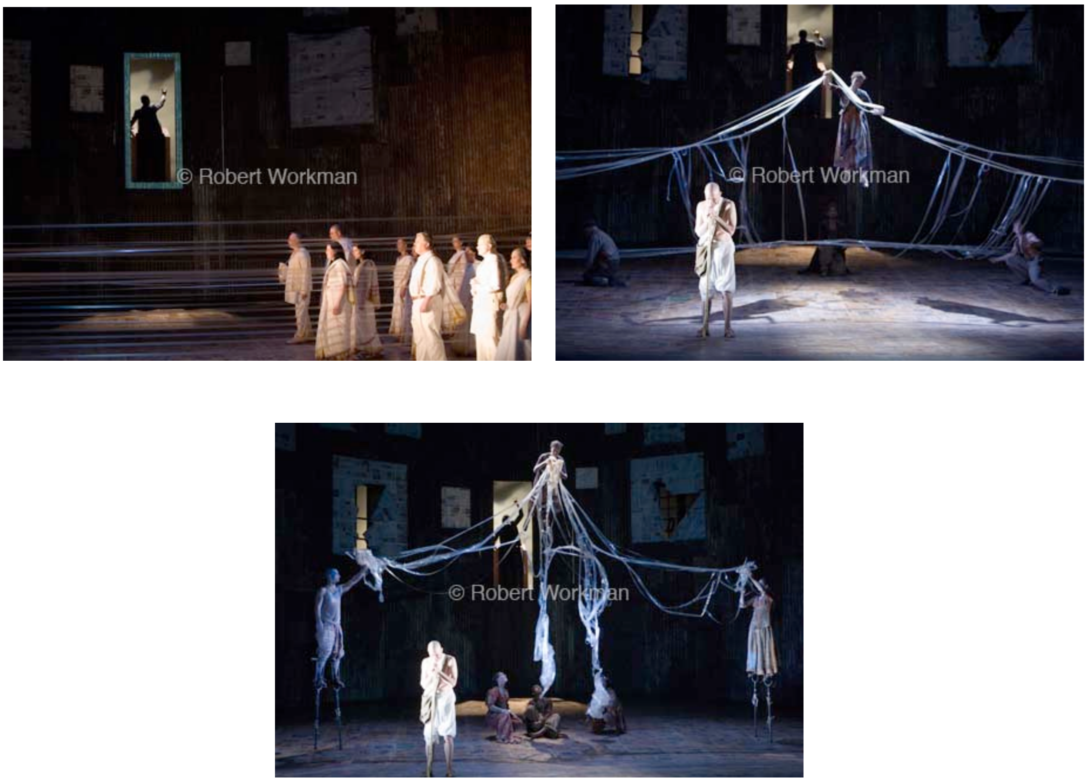

Fig. 12. Act III. ENO, London (2007). Photos by Robert Workman

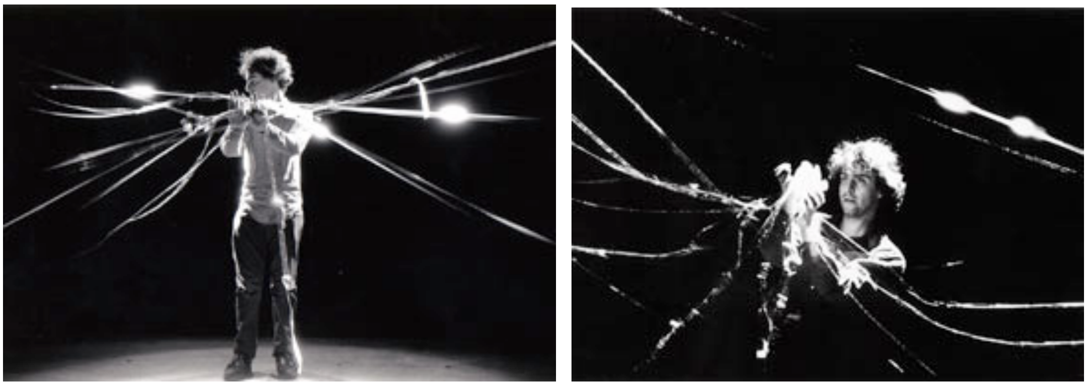

Fig. 13. *70 Hill Lane* (1997). Photos by Sheila Burnett

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[44] The role of the aerialist was performed my Matilda Leyser in the 2008 production in New York, while in the 2010 production in London Patel's role was performed by Adeel Akhtar, and Llewellyn-Smith's by Rajha Shakiry.

A lot of the decisions in the company's work are a result of staying open to different influences, old and new, allowing them to be externalised in the present work process. The challenge is in conducting and honing these elements within the structure of a new piece so that they carry meanings and functions that go beyond their previous ones. The found vocabulary itself may not be new to the company; rather, the accident, or the 'surprise,' lies in what they achieve with it and in their effects on spectators. Reflecting this attitude towards creative ideas, Crouch believes that the skill in designing is not in coming up with 'original' ideas, but it is 'about being open to why something affects you, and how to chase something' (Interview). Demystifying the notion of creativity, Crouch is aware of the questioned nature of 'originality,' stating his interest in 'recycling' not in originality; or using elements already utilised in earlier works as found objects for a new piece, which entails the risk of seeming repetition; something the company has been criticised for on some occasions (Crouch, Public Talk). However, the reappearance of common vocabulary is not a matter of blind repetition, rather each performance is in part the result of memory and of knowing certain theatrical codes that bear traces of other performances. Known devices, already stored in the memory of artistic experience, are brought into a new performance to be played with, transformed and incorporated in ways that transcend prior patterns, giving them a new life and a sense of the unexpected. This process of mixing references to other performances, or intertextuality, is not exclusive to the dramatic text, but it includes other properties of the performance event, including the visual vocabulary and uses of materials.

Silvija Jestrovic uses the term 'transtheatricality' to describe the relationship between a particular performance and all other performances, theatrical styles, and representational modes, suggesting that not textual, but performative links dominate the relationship of one performance to others (59). According to this concept, every performance is ‘transtheatrical,’ for theatrical works are not ‘pure,’ but they bare the traces of other forms and influences, and they become the result of the readings and interpretations of several contributors including makers and audiences. The notion of transtheatricality in this context highlights the theatricality of the performance event and functions as a distancing device. As explained in the previous chapter in the context of objectification as alienation, the distancing occurs through the two steps of the Hegelian dialectic that emphasise commonality and also destabilise it; or the ‘negation of negation.’ If this is applied to the work of Improbable, it is found that bringing into a new performance familiar vocabulary, renegotiated in new contexts, establishes a duality between the familiar and the strange, which takes audiences who are familiar with the work of Improbable, or indeed with the household objects they repeatedly use, by surprise. By implication, a performance that negotiates the shift between familiarity and its subversion produces an experience for the audience that simultaneously shifts between absorption and distance: a surrender to the effects of the musical score and the visual spectacle, and at the same time, a sense of alienation caused by the demands the staging makes on the audience. This generated duality is expressed, to some extent, in the statement of one of the opera’s principal singers, Elena Xanthoudakis, that the audience viewing the opera ‘should have a contemplative but engaging experience’ (Xanthoudakis). The final result is a performance that defies easy or passive reception.

The following section looks at this process of transformation where the object passes from the familiar to the strange, and from the utilitarian to the theatrical; or the ‘alchemy,’ that moves the object between the construction of belief and disbelief. ‘Alchemizing the materials,’ is a term used by the company members to describe a process of engagement with objects that occurs during the rehearsals and in front of the audience, playing a part in telling the story of the performance and in renegotiating the audiences’ perception. This metaphor of change and transformation will be illustrated by drawing on examples from the work process, as well as on scenes from the final production.

3.6. Improbable Objects: ‘Alchemizing’ Humble Materials

Although their starting points vary from one production to another, the making process for Improbable often starts with a mental or an emotional impulse; an idea or a physical material that the company members then follow and push through play and improvisation games. It is what they often refer to as ‘pushing an obsession,’ or pushing a persistent idea, an object, or a material, seeing how it can open up a whole world (Crouch, Interview) and how this can feed into their interest in storytelling. ‘[J]ust one idea, pushed and pushed and pushed,’ states Crouch (Crouch, McDermott and Simpson).[45] It is another way of demystifying the act of creation and the notion of ‘skill,’ which is not necessarily related to the amount of ‘original’ ideas one can have. As Crouch puts it, ‘you always make some obvious choices, but maybe then just try to follow that, if one idea [for example] could be to put […] more books than you could possibly imagine’ (Interview). This is reminiscent of Keith Johnstone’s ideas on creativity as that which involves trusting the obvious rather than trying to be ‘original.’ Johnstone explains, ‘I simply approach each problem on a basis of common sense and try to find the most obvious solution possible' (28), therefore, '[t]he improviser has to realise that the more obvious he is, the more original he appears' (87), which indeed applies to Crouch's thoughts on his design process.

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[45] Crouch gives an example of pushing the use of an object in a performance, such as creating an entire performance just with suitcases (Interview). *Panic* (2008, 2009) shows an ‘obsession’ with brown paper bags, for instance.

Pushing an obsession then continues until images, stories or emotions become externalised, generating and building up performance materials that often become linked to the chosen object, whether in metaphorical or physical ways. The newspaper, for example, is linked to *Satyagraha* as a political metaphor in addition to being the main material of the performance's physical environment and creative process. The poor, household materials that Improbable is known for using are pushed beyond their functional limitations. *Sticky* (1999) started with improvising with sticky tape, which is a material that the company recurrently uses in workshops, rehearsals and performances since *Animo* (1996) and *70 Hill Lane*, and that reappears in *Satyagraha*. *Sticky* became a large-scale outdoor spectacle where a fantastic world of buildings and creatures is created. This world then transforms and collapses in front of the audience using only thousands of rolls of sticky tape stretched and pulled by a group of performers and cranes. It developed from a workshop on materials given by Crouch in 1998 as part of the Stockton Riverside Festival (*Improbable*). In another example, making the decision for the set of *Spirit* happened from the rehearsal space. There was a small ramp in the corner of the room that they started to improvise on. Then they decided to recreate it on a larger scale, and it became the set and the performance space itself where all the action happens. It became 'the promise' in McDermott's words ('Dreaming').

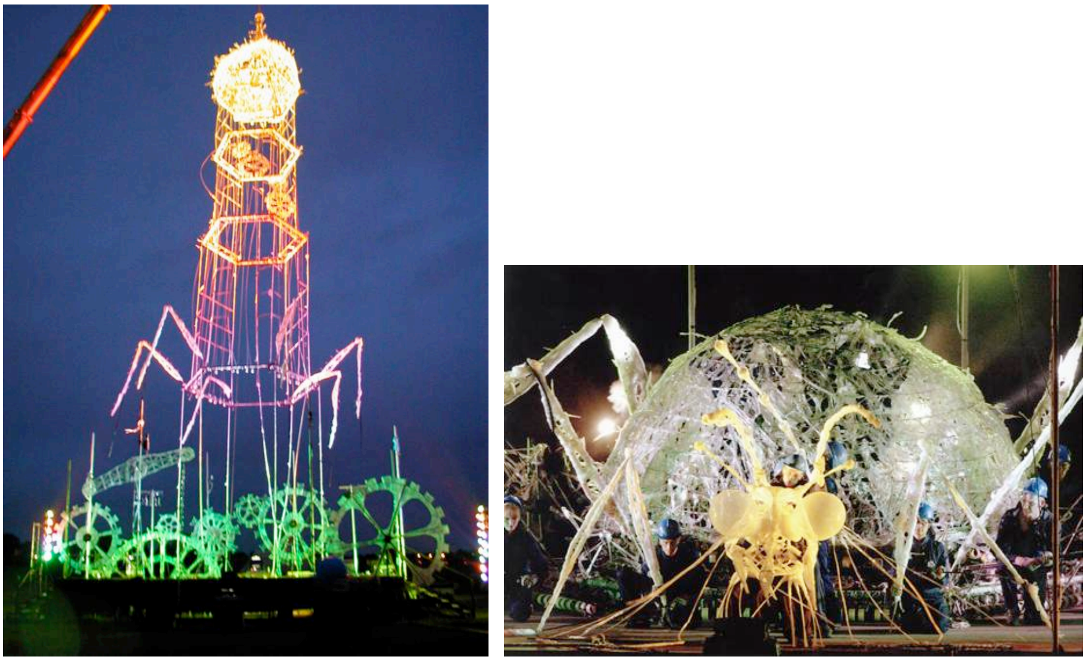

Fig. 14. *Sticky* (2001, 2003). Photos by Nick Read and Richard Haughton

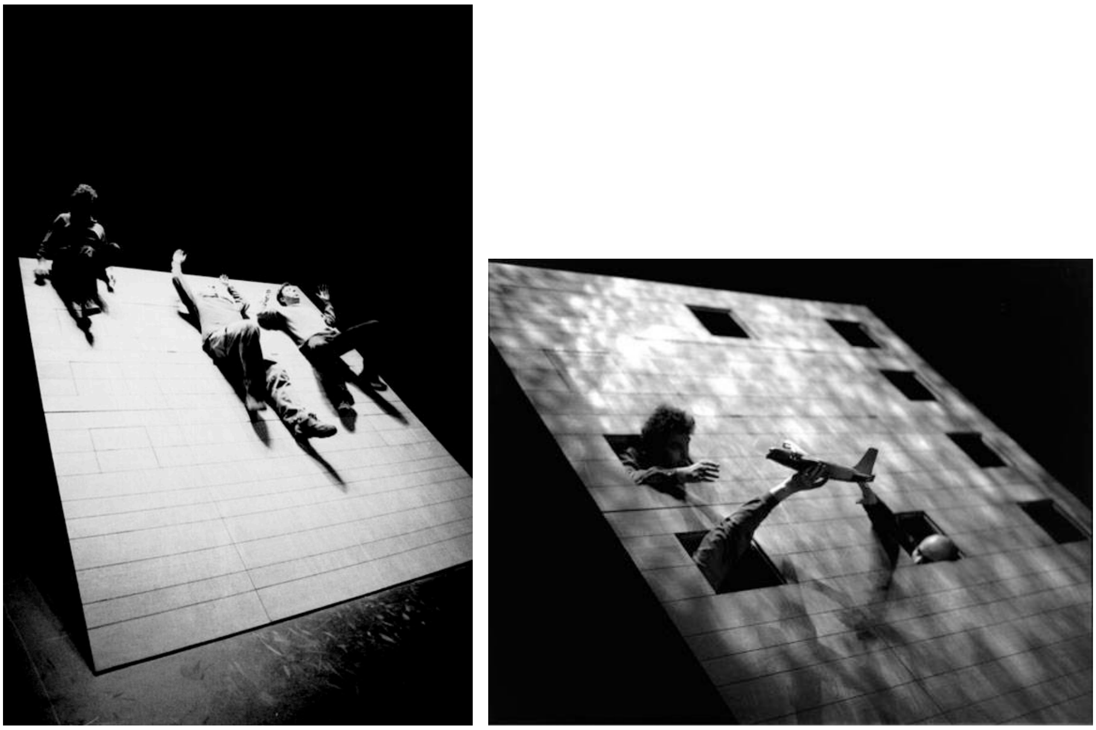

Fig. 15. *Spirit* (2000). Photos by Alan McAteer

In *Panic* (2008, 2009), the idea of the design started with brown paper bags. It is a material favoured by Crouch as a drawing surface that is inexpensive and widely available. The bags were used in the production as masks as well as

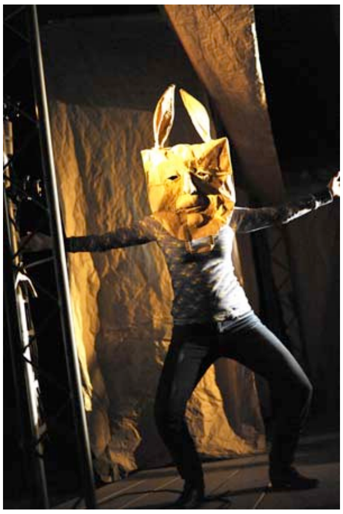

Fig. 16. *Panic* (2008, 2009)

containers for stacks of books, and brown paper sheets were used to create stage curtains. In another example, creating the imagery of *70 Hill Lane* started with newspaper sheets; a signature material for Improbable. One of the early decisions in that production was to create a house out of newspaper stuck onto sticky tape stretched in space. Then the makers realised that the tape alone in the space had a unique quality, it was ‘magical, and strange, because it was there and it wasn’t there,’ it was almost invisible, which left an interpretive space for spectators to read into in multiple ways (McDermott, ‘Dreaming’). Eventually, the sticky tape became the dominant material of creation on stage in *70 Hill Lane*. Performers stretched and pulled the tape in different directions and shapes to define the walls and fabrics of the staircases, the corridors and furniture of the house in which McDermott, the main character, was born. While McDermott told his childhood story about an encounter with a poltergeist during his adolescence, describing the metamorphoses he and the house underwent as he grew up, the object was creating a parallel story; like an echo of the narrative being told. The use of the tape transformed the space for McDermott to create his story. Towards the end of the performance, the tape was cut down and drawn together to create a small ghostly figure that gently strode across the stage with the help of performers before transforming into a shining globe. Holly Hill describes moments from that performance during the Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre in Egypt in 1997,

> Wide bands of scotch tape and four metal poles were all that McDermott and actor/directors Lee Simpson and Julian Crouch used

> to conjure the house and its furnishings. As McDermott told his tale, accompanied by the jazzy live music of Ben Park, the actors stretched tape around and across the poles to make walls and windows, and bend them forward to form a bay, to put together stairs, furniture, and even a deep freeze with lid. When the building was razed at the end, they scrunched all the tape together and out of that emerged a puppet, the poltergeist made manifest in a fragile creature tenderly manipulated by the trio of performers, as if out of rubble could come a magical being. (388)[46]

The idea of 'alchemy' is evidently suggested in Hill's description, and that became one of the company's consistent features of theatrical ingenuity since then. Similarly, the staging of *Satyagraha* and visualising its material environment started with the choice of materials before the design of the imagery themselves. In that production, two main materials with strong political connotations spoke to the makers and provided inspiration; they are corrugated iron and newsprint. Choosing the materials at the beginning of the process was grounded in everyday life. The choice of using such humble objects in the opera medium, where opulence is a norm, paid homage to Gandhi's abstinence and simplicity of life. As Crouch puts it, '[a]s everyone associates Gandhi with poverty, it seemed appropriate for us to choose humble materials to inspire the production' (McDermot and Crouch, 'Discussing'). This conveniently served the company's interest in improvising with household materials in rehearsals until the 'unexpected' emerges out of them. Especially the newspaper is almost always used in their workshops, rehearsals and performances. Thus the choice of those materials was conditioned by established patterns of practice as discussed above, but the use of the newsprint in *Satyagraha* was pushed beyond any previous employment of the material. Crouch states that the urge was to attempt to ‘alchemize the newspaper and discover if we can create something that looks extraordinary with a dozen skilled actors’ (McDermot and Crouch, ‘Discussing’). The metaphor of ‘alchemy’ eloquently captures the changes that occurred to the material, and that exceeded the conventional physical boundaries ascribed to the ordinary objects.

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[46] I recall watching that performance in Cairo in 1997 as part of the Festival and being fully engaged with the transformations of the sticky tape. I was transported into the house and its different rooms, 'seeing' their architectural features simply created by the shimmering lines of the tape floating in space. Even the stretching sounds of the tape became integral as an auditory element of the theatrical experience that kept echoing in my mind for a long time after the performance ended. *70 Hill Lane* received the Festival's Best Performance Award that year, and it was the performance that introduced me to Improbable and to their ability to create entire worlds out of almost nothing.

On a more direct level, Gandhi’s life and principles were linked to the ‘objects of the external world’ chosen for staging the opera. In the company’s preliminary research on Gandhi’s history, they noticed that in many of the early photographs taken of him in South Africa, parts of constructions made out of corrugated iron appear in the background. Additionally, it is a humble, cheap material, a combination of something organic and also manmade, and a quick way to create buildings in what Crouch sees as ‘the architecture of colonialism’ (Interview). Thus it became the material of the set, which consists of a corrugated cyclorama backing a large, circular playing area, which is the first thing that Crouch created even before the initial research and development stages. The corrugated iron walls functioned on stage as both an outdoor and an indoor structure. The texture and the rusty colour of the iron’s surface endowed the material of the set with the fragility of old paper. An audience member commented on the vulnerable quality of the corrugated iron, which seemed like cardboard from her point of view.[47] The set is self-contained and transformational, with various possibilities for openings and movements, thus there is always a potential for change.

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[47] I am indebted to Dr Libby Worth for her comment.

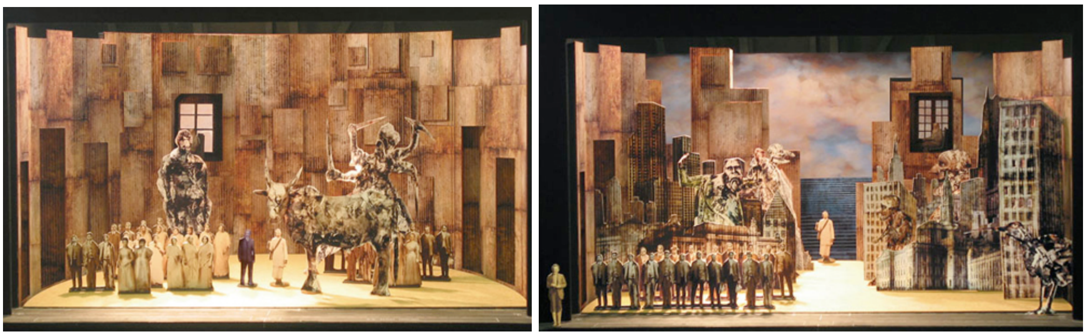

Fig. 17. *Satyagraha*'s set model. Designed by Julian Crouch. Made by Robert Thirtle

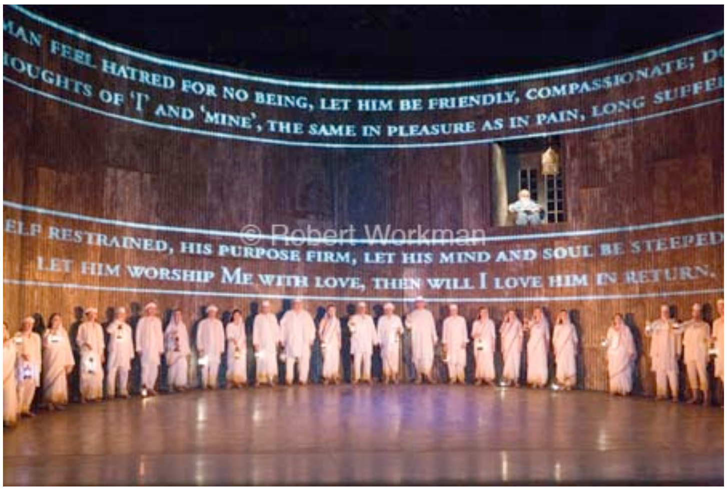
AN FEEL HATRED FOR NO BEING, LET HIM BE FRIENDLY, COMPASSIONATE; DO
OUGHTS OF 'I' AND 'MINE', THE SAME IN PLEASURE AS IN PAIN, LONG SUFFE
ELF RESTRAINED, HIS PURPOSE FIRM, LET HIS MIND AND SOUL BE STEEPED
LET HIM WORSHIP ME WITH LOVE, THEN WILL I LOVE HIM IN RETURN.
© Robert Workman

Fig. 18. Act II, Scene 3. ENO, London (2007). Photo by Robert Workman

As for the newspaper, it is integral to the subject of the opera. Glass dedicated Act II, Scene 2 of the opera to *Indian Opinion*, the newsprint publication that Gandhi established, which gave the company a thematic justification for using the paper. More than just a material for creating stage imagery, the newspaper functioned as a political metaphor. The medium played a fundamental role in Gandhi's political campaign for freedom and empowerment by peaceful means. Gandhi established *Indian Opinion* with the aim of informing European communities in South Africa about the needs and issues concerning Indians there, and as a means of spreading news about Indians in the colonies for the public in India. It became a vehicle for defiance and challenging state laws, thus an integral part of Gandhi's philosophy of political activism (Dhupelia-Mesthrie). As Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie argues, the paper 'became linked with Gandhi's transformation to a mass movement leader and his philosophy of satyagraha' (Dhupelia-Mesthrie). In 1904, Gandhi relocated the publishing office to the communal farm, where the rhythm of life became dictated by the production of the paper. The publication process became part of the work ethics governing the life in the community and which revolved around ideas of sharing, commitment, self-reliance, and collective action (Dhupelia-Mesthrie). Not being a commercial enterprise, but a publication committed to serving social causes, it itself became a symbol of independence and political integrity. Dhupelia-Mesthrie, Manilal Gandhi's granddaughter,[48] asserts that '[t]he pages of *Indian Opinion* provide a valuable historical record of the disabilities that Indians suffered under. It also provides an invaluable record of the political life of the Indian community.' Thus it was a key mobilising device in Gandhi's movement (Dhupelia-Mesthrie).

The newsprint, this ordinary, humble object; fragile and also durable, often taken for granted, easily and quickly discarded, is indeed a key mobilising device in the opera that is at the heart of its impressive staging. It moves along a journey that is symbolically parallel to Gandhi's journey of transformation, embodying a narrative that captures aspects of his struggle and alludes to many of his principles of commitment and collective action. To give a sense of what is achieved by the newspaper alone, I will describe in some length moments from its onstage journey in *Satyagraha*. The journey starts with the sheets of newspaper brought out of Gandhi's suitcase who is lying on the floor after being thrown off the train in the opening scene. The sheets are then brought to life by the Skills Ensemble and turned into moving shapes. The abstract shapes gradually form figures that grow in scale until they incorporate more newspaper sheets and objects, eventually coalescing into a giant warrior puppet almost reaching to the top of the proscenium. In the mythological battlefield in Act I, Scene 1 (‘The Kuru Field of Justice’), the large puppet (reminiscent of the Hindu goddess Kali) confronts an equally towering knight-like puppet made out of ordinary baskets. They represent the two opposing armies of Indians and Europeans that go into a futile armed combat eventually falling into pieces.

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[48] Manilal is Gandhi's second son, and one of the newspaper's editors in the 1950s (Dhupelia-Mesthrie).

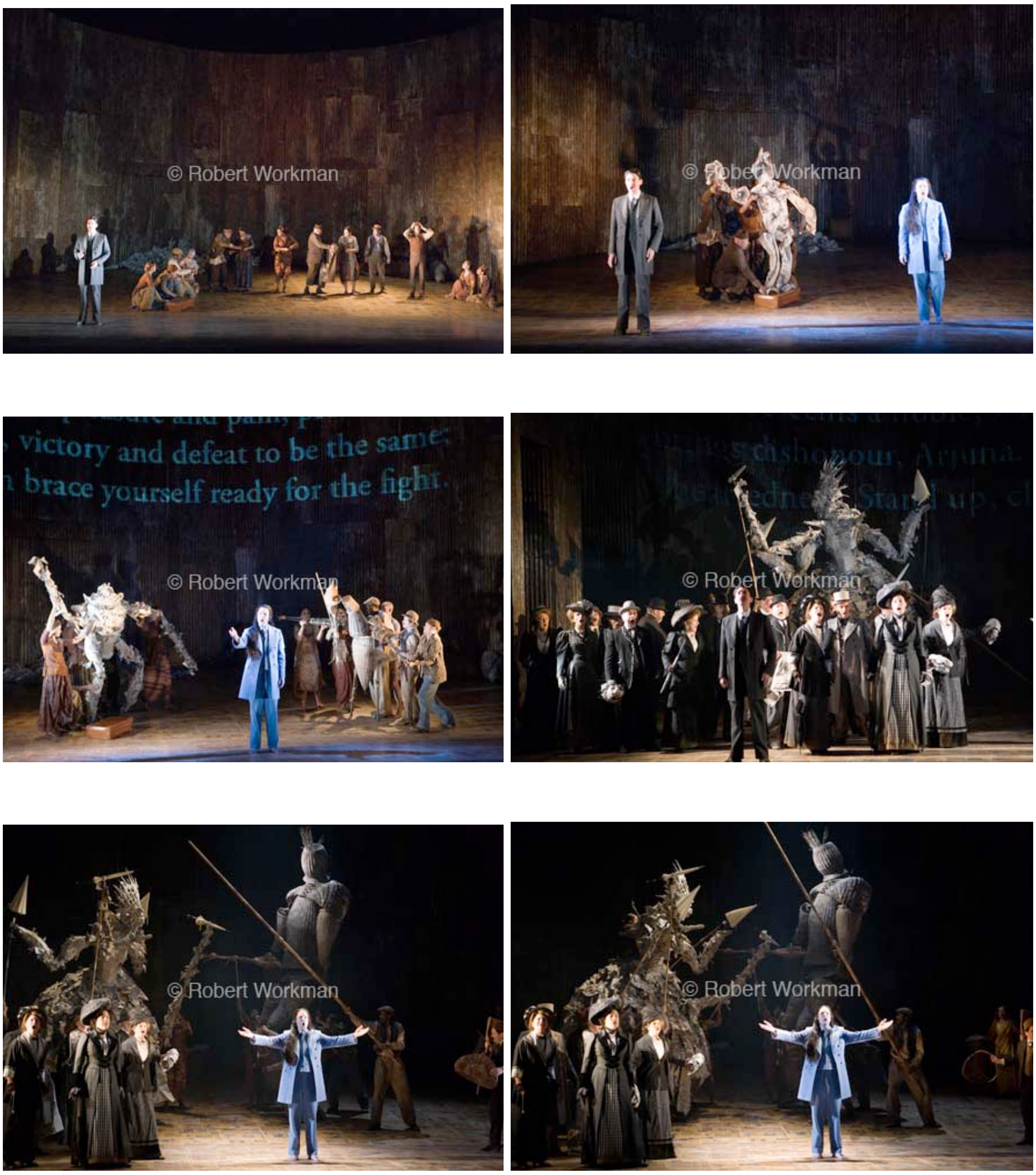
victory and defeat to be the same;
brace yourself ready for the fight.
© Robert Workman

Fig. 19. The newspaper transformation sequence. Act I, Scene 1. Photos by Robert Workman

Both figures are assembled and disassembled by performers on stage in front of the audience, making space for a figure of a cow to emerge from the rubble, which is loosely created out of a mix of the two materials; newspaper and baskets, carried by two performers on stilts.[49] Incorporating an image of a cow was one of the early decisions, included for its association with everyday life in India, and its sacredness in Hinduism. Crouch is interested in the cow's movement and in how it is respected and allowed to safely wander around the streets of India (London Rehearsal Notes, 2007). Creating the cow out of a combination of the two materials signifies a peaceful force that reconciles the two opposing worlds. The figure eventually disintegrates and dissolves off stage marking the end of the scene.

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[49] Charlotte Mooney and Alex Harvey.

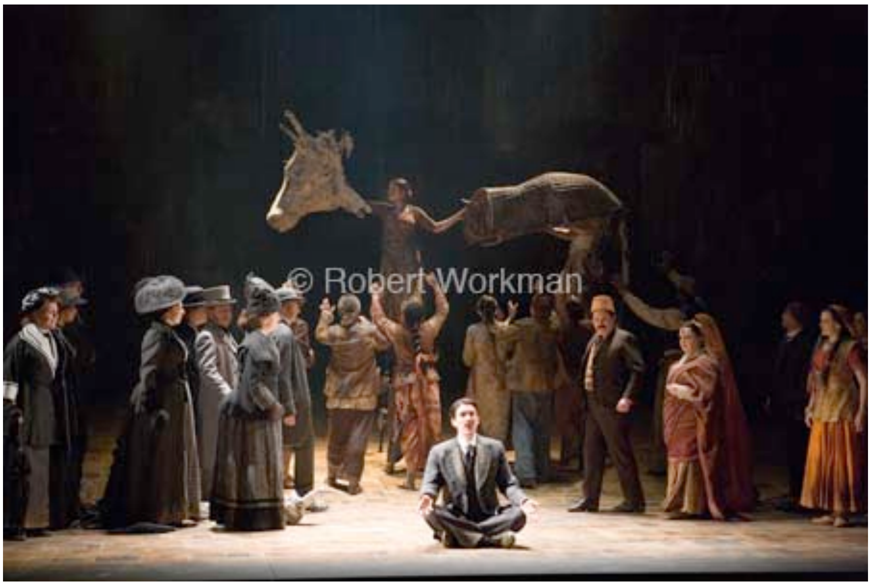


Fig. 20. Act I, Scene 1. ENO, London (2007). Photo by Robert Workman

In Act II, Scene 1 ('Confrontation and Rescue'), the newspaper returns in the form of a group of grotesque, large puppets in different sizes and shapes carried by the Skills Ensemble. They are endowed with a German Expressionist look inspired by the period in which the action took place (Crouch qtd. in Wakin). The intention was to make them seem 'like the newspaper puppets had made themselves,' and that they appear disjointed and separate from the rest of the imagery as a comment on the disconnectedness of modern life (Crouch, Interview; Public Talk). The figures are seen as the violent forces of urban society; corrupt politicians, rapacious businessmen, angered by Gandhi's open denunciations of injustices. They enter the stage through flat cutout scenery in the shape of cityscapes carried by stagehands.

The puppets move slowly and jerkily like clockwork toys. They encircle the vulnerable figure of Gandhi for a few moments, before slowly turning around and exiting the stage. Later in that same scene, the paper in the hands of the Skills Ensemble and singers shifts between being a utility, a newspaper passed around and read, and also crumpled into stones thrown at Gandhi by the hostile 'Europeans.'

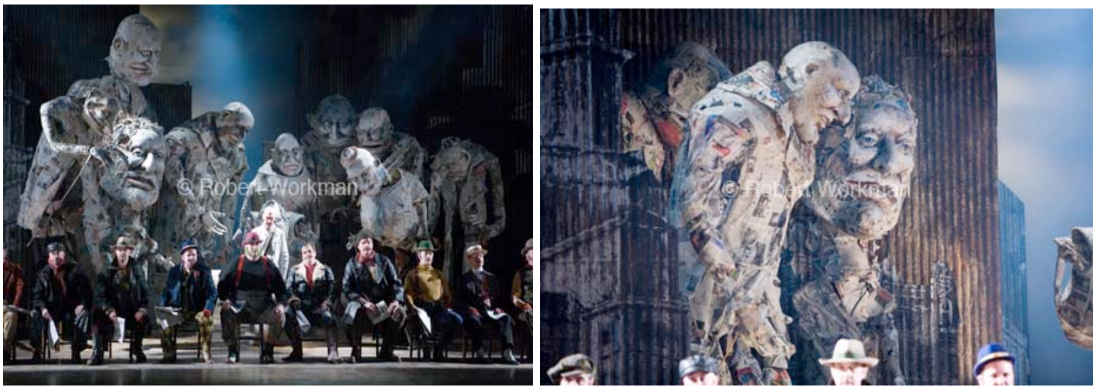
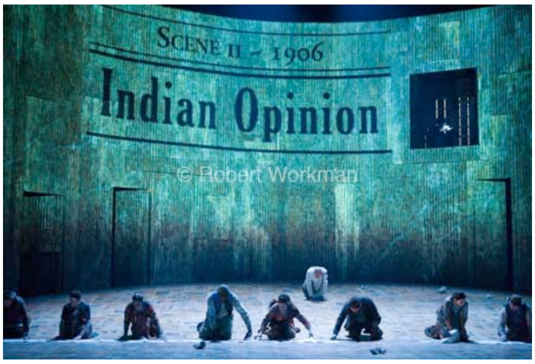
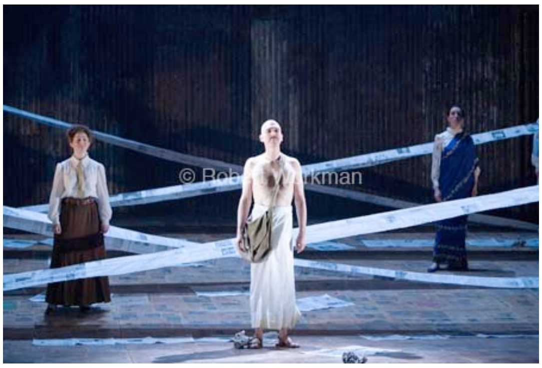


Fig. 21. Act II, Scene 1. ENO, London (2007). Photo by Robert Workman

In the following scene, '*Indian Opinion*,' the stage becomes dominated by endless streams of uncut newspaper sheets that are dragged on stage, passed between the Ensemble performers, stretched and pulled in all directions and runs across the full width and height of the stage, signifying the dynamic and rhythmical process of producing the publication. In the hands of performers, they create waves, walls and wings behind Gandhi and his followers. The sheets are then pulled along the stage's full height for projected Sanskrit, Gujarati and Roman characters to slide vertically down them like trickles of water. The long sheets are then torn down, gathered together and crumpled into a giant ball frantically rolled by performers centre stage like a waterfall where the figure of Gandhi immerses himself to come out wearing only the dhoti. The ball then disappears through an opening in the set's back wall, while more sheets fall from above. The fallen sheets spread across the stage floor are then swept by brooms and picked up slowly and carefully by the Ensemble, until the stage becomes completely clear of paper as it was at the beginning of the scene.


Scene II – 1906
Indian Opinion
© Robert Workman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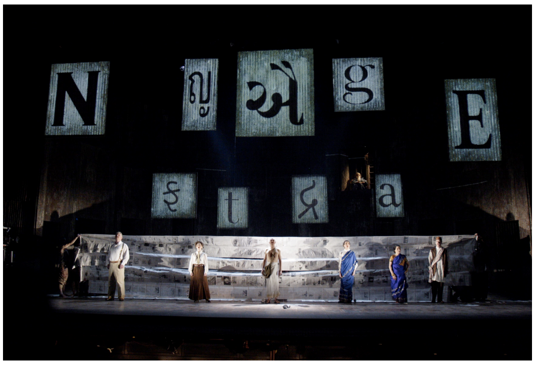
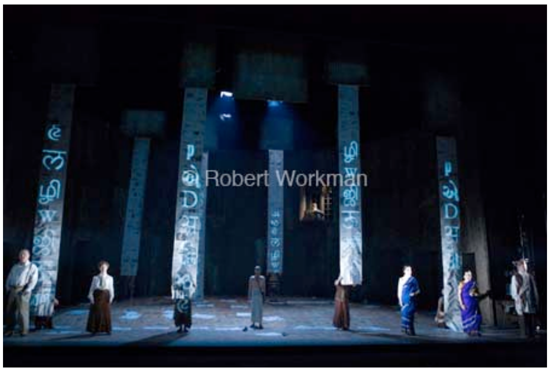


Photo by Catherine Ashmore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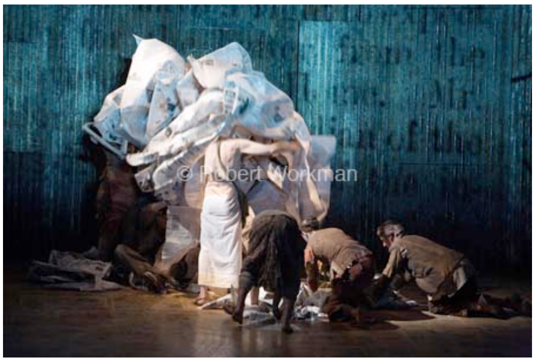
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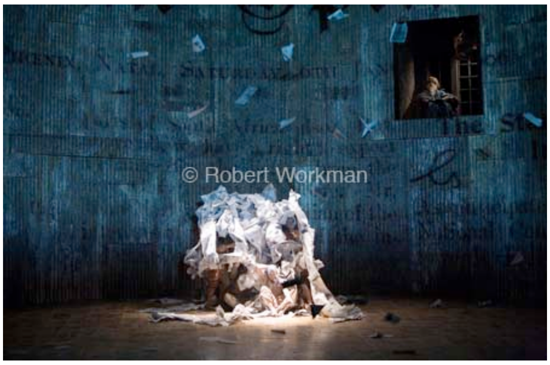
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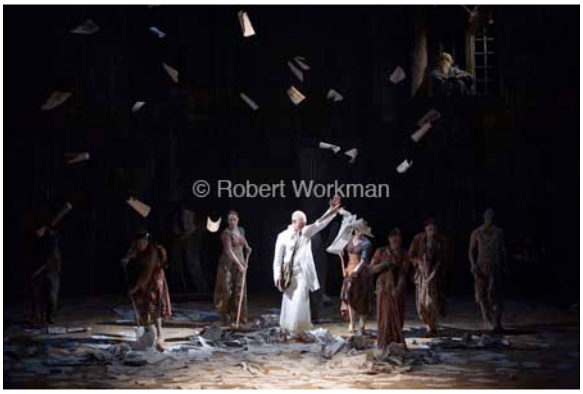

Fig. 22. The newspaper transformation sequence in Act II, Scene 2. ENO, London (2007). Photos by Robert Workman

In the final Act, ‘New Castle March,’ the newspaper ends up as screens blocking openings in the set. Shadows of demonstrators and violent riot police are then projected from behind them. The paper is finally torn open by the riot police who enter through it, slide down ropes and land on stage.

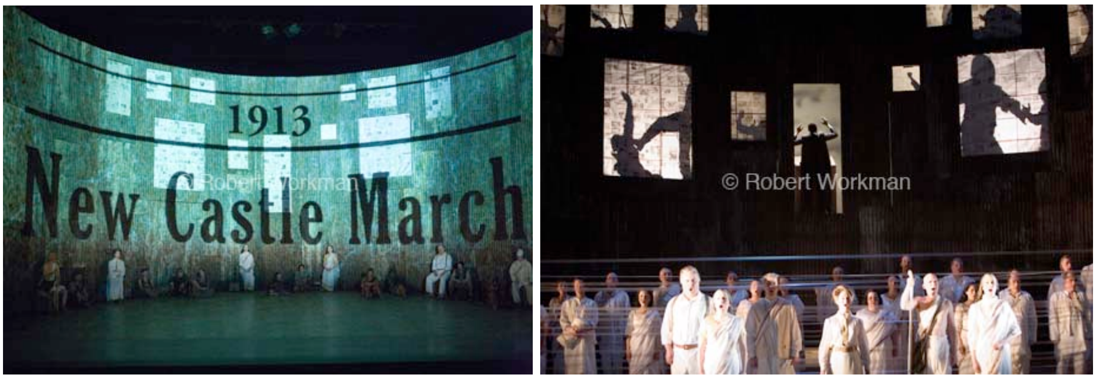

Fig. 23. Act III. ENO, London. Photos by Robert Workman

In addition to newspaper, other simple everyday objects play important roles in several moments. Baskets in the hands of the chorus become weapons; bunched withies are used as brooms for sweeping the stage, by turning them upside down they become trees then branches planted in the stage floor. Mixed combinations of baskets and brooms attached to the bodies of performers become the body of a crocodile; chairs held by the chorus men (the ‘Europeans’) in front of their faces become riot shields against Gandhi; lines of sticky tape are stretched across the stage to be pulled and moulded into a hovering figure that eventually vanishes into space.

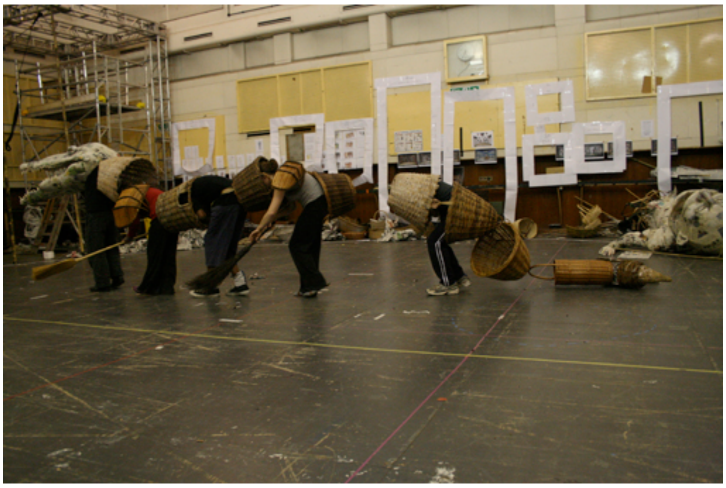

Fig. 24. *Satyagraha*'s rehearsals. ENO, London (2007). Photo by Nesreen Hussein

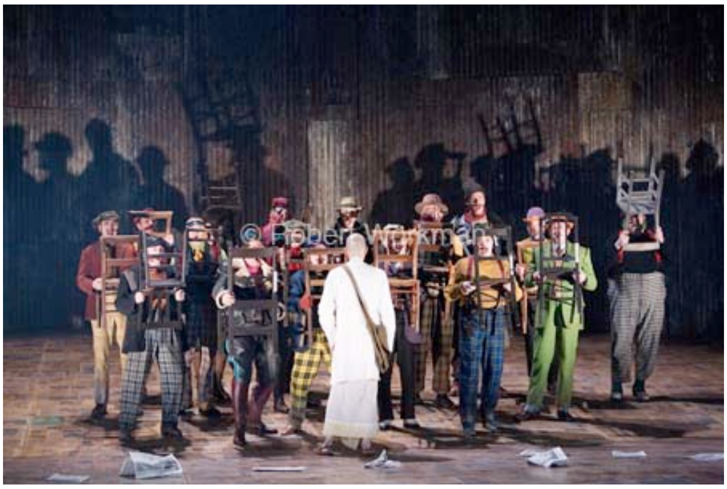

Fig. 25. Act II, Scene 1. ENO, London (2007). Photo by Robert Workman

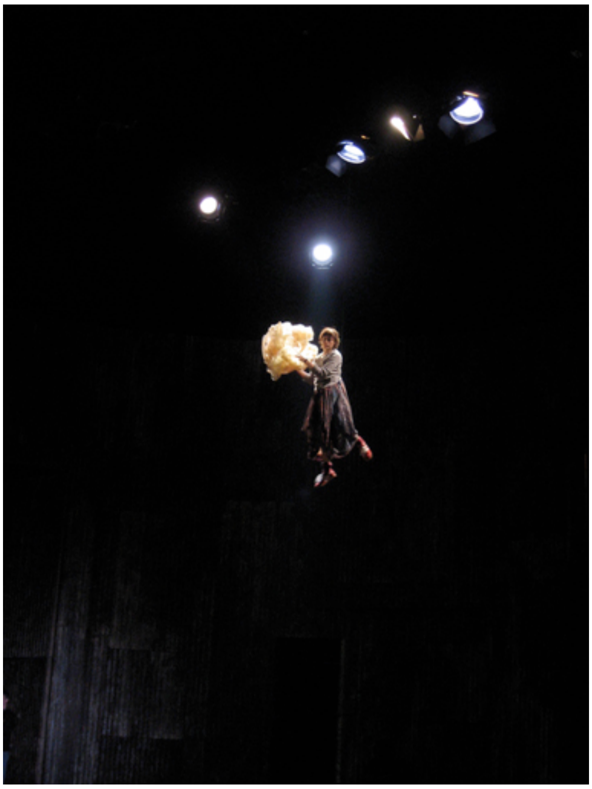

Fig. 26. Rehearsing the creation and destruction of the sticky tape figure. ENO, London (2007).
Photos by Nesreen Hussein

The dynamic staging is marked by an ongoing, flowing transformation where nearly all of the stage action takes the form of construction and dismantling; accretions or removals of material objects; things being built up, and things being stripped down. In their constant instability, the physical objects enable both mimetic representation and its subversion. As soon as a theatrical sign is fleetingly recognised, it then shifts into something other, challenging the fixity of representational relations and taking the audience by surprise. A reviewer comments:

> The visual ingenuity of McDermott and Crouch's staging is a constant source of intrigue and illumination. Extraordinary puppets materialise and transform before our eyes: a holy cow becomes a fearsome warrior, countless yards of plastic tape (the "red tape" of politics, if you like) are somehow manipulated into a hovering angel. You don't always quite believe your eyes as actors on stilts or actors seeming to hover in space work their magic. (Seckerson)

This transformability of objects enables free play with theatrical signs. It contributes to the openness of interpretation and reinforces the notion of the theatrical stage as a place of estrangement that takes the audience beyond the comfort of rationality. None of the actions' dynamics are hidden; all of the mechanisms are exposed, including the performers' struggle in assembling the over-sized figures. The struggle is revealed for its link to the idea of making change through collective action integral to the Satyagraha movement. McDermott believes that 'there's actually a kind of struggle involved in the performers making those images happen, […] because those moments of change can't happen unless people sacrifice something' ('Video Interview'). Calling attention to the work's mediating system destabilises the completeness of the stage world. Nothing is stable in that staging. It is what Improbable refers to as having a 'gap' rooted in the tension between familiarity and strangeness; between the performers and the objects. The estrangement caused by the incompleteness of the theatrical image and laying the device bare is enhanced by the child-like naivety in which most of the images are executed, with a sense of handmade aesthetics underlined by the distorted scales of things.

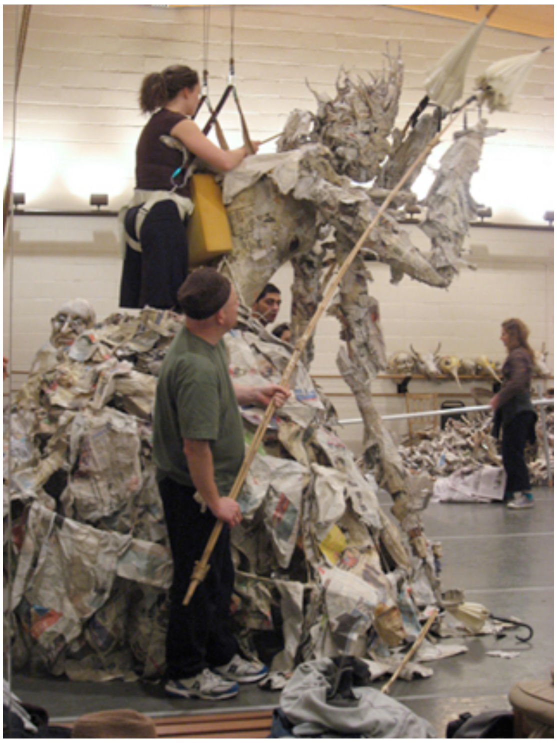

Fig. 27. The Skills Ensemble assembling one of the 'warriors' figures during rehearsals. ENO, London (2007)
Photo by Nesreen Hussein

The naivety resides in the images' playful openness and in the sense of surprise they invoke. Act I, Scene 3 ('The Vow') opens with a crocodile figure that suddenly appears from behind a large scenic cutout of a barn made out of corrugated iron. The crocodile swiftly crosses the stage before dissolving into separate pieces of basket attached to performers who exit the stage in different directions.[50] The entrance of the large puppets in Act II, Scene 1 ('Confrontation and Rescue') is led by a large figure of a bird carried by a performer on stilts.[51] The bird makes an unexpected entrance leaping, and swiftly crosses the stage from one end and exits at the other. The two figures of the crocodile and the bird do not directly represent specific characters or link to certain ideas in the opera. Nor do the makers have a specific justification for creating and including them in the staging. The unexpected appearance of those figures is playful and almost spontaneous, leaving a memorable mark and also destabilising the viewing experience. It is left for the objects to tell the stories and for the audiences to give them meaning.[52]

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[50] The performers who carry the body of the crocodile are Charlotte Mooney, Charlie Llewellyn-Smith (replaced by Rajha Shakiry in 2008), Vic Llewellyn, Robert Thirtle and Charlie Folorunsho.

[51] Performer Charlotte Mooney.

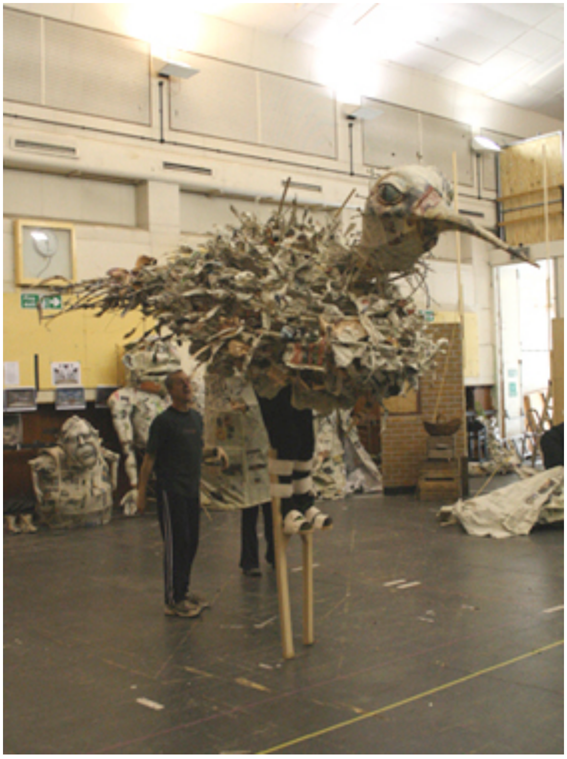

Fig. 28. The bird. ENO, London (2007)
Photo by Nesreen Hussein

The narrative generativity of objects; how they convey multiple meanings, is evident in how a reviewer perceived the figure of the bird as a representation of Gandhi himself in the form of 'an endearingly awkward bird puppet, which evoked with curious accuracy his stick-legged, avian walk' (Mendelsohn). Crouch admits that 'it's another trick of the design is to let the audience do the work so they'll get involved in it, don't do everything for them' (Interview). In those cases of objects' authorial participation, they exceed a conventional function as props, and move from the margins to the centre of the narrative initiating a series of dynamics of exchange with the spectator. As Peter Schwenger puts it, [a]n object in this view is a text inciting mental events whose nature will often be narrative' (101). The objects accumulate associations, values and experiences as they pass through various hands and various degrees of change, constructing their own biographies along the journey. They become 'the custodians of narratives to correspond, which emanate from them like an aura' (Schwenger 109).

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[52] Julian Crouch argues that including the figure of the bird was almost a musical response for him, because the figure has a different rhythm from the other heavy-weighted puppets in that scene. It is not necessarily related to an idea about Gandhi. 'I don't want to know what the bird means really, but it's interesting after [the production is on stage] to talk about it. But it's not interesting to talk about it to decide whether it should go on the show or not. […] If you get a feel for it, just put it in' (Interview). This approach towards 'intuitive,' playful decisions reflects the makers' resistance to pinning ideas down, or to limiting possibilities by over-analysing them in advance.

In the staging of the opera, things cease to remain static material objects and symbols that reflect pre-existing ideas or that project aspects of human subjectivity, but they become 'co-producers' of meaning in the theatrical event, to borrow a term from Joanna Sofaer in *Material Identities* (2). They take part in changing understanding of the world and the perceived realities represented on stage, becoming 'secondary agents' that are active in the construction of theatrical narrative. In order to establish such productive creative process, Improbable members consistently try to destabilise a hierarchical subject-object relationship, and they call for this as an important condition for achieving a positive making dynamic and an enriching experience for the audience. The above cases of object play create chances to rediscover reality, reshaping it into new manifestations in a flowing, two-way interaction with objects.

In the following, I will look closer at this relationship, particularly focusing on the 'material voice' of the object and how its inclusion played significant part in developing the production and the objects' transformational capacities, which is an extension and a result of Improbable's theatrical alchemy. As an illustration of the practical implications of this approach to objects, I will present two important improvisatory dynamics from the creative process of the company used in making *Satyagraha* as well as other productions. They are the ‘newspaper exercise,’ commonly used as a rich and multidimensional device for devising and performer training, and another system of improvisation with a ‘kit’ of objects that is structured towards generating scenes and narratives in a specific production.

3.7. Objects of Respect: ‘Listening’ to the Object’s Intrinsic Materiality

Chapter One refers to Tadeusz Kantor’s attempts to revolutionise the art of performance by renegotiating the relationship between the actor and the object. Kantor’s extensive body of writing and practice demonstrate his desire to challenge conventional systems of signification by approaching the object for its own characteristics and unique presence in the performance space, not for its secondary functions as a representational device, a prop, or an aesthetic object. Things for him are not seen as tools to express present thoughts and to mirror feelings, but they are allowed to break out of the limitations of what already exists and enter unpredictable terrains. As he puts it,

> ACCEPT THE REALITY THAT WAS WRENCHED OUT AND SEPARATED FROM THE EVERYDAY
> AS THE FIRST ELEMENT OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS;
> SUBSTITUTE A REAL OBJECT FOR AN ARTISTIC OBJECT;
> AN OBSERVATION THAT
> A DISCARDED OBJECT, WHICH IS AT THE THRESHOLD OF BEING THROWN OUT,
> WHICH IS USELESS, GARBAGE,
> HAS THE BIGGEST CHANCE TO BECOME THE OBJECT OF ART AND THE WORK OF ART. I CALLED IT THEN
> “ A POOR OBJECT . ” (‘Reality’ 118)

This idea was expanded in his notion of ‘the reality of the lowest rank,’ which became the basis of his artistic process. From Kantor’s writings stems an understanding of an object, which remains part of everyday life; an object that forms an ‘identity’ and a ‘history’ throughout its life cycle, which cannot be denied when it is employed in a performance. Kantor’s paradigm for objects finds echoes in Improbable’s thoughts on practice. By paying attention to objects in the company’s creative process, it becomes possible to heighten their abilities to convey meaning through their own embedded material properties. The attention is invested in the mundane objects for what they are as materials, not for what they represent, which enables the materials to contribute productively as catalysts for action and creation. The inherent qualities of the sticky tape (its transparency, sound, rhythm, durability), or those of the newspaper (its texture, colours, sound, strength and fragility) are what enhance the objects’ active presence and their expressive values. In their use by Improbable, the objects’ original functions as household materials are not hidden, but they are revealed as part of the stage mechanism and used in telling stories. McDermott argues, ‘you need to develop a respect and honouring of the materials before they will become interesting.’ For example, ‘if you are going to have a relationship onstage with a rope you can’t disrespect it; you have to honour what it can do, what its strengths and weaknesses are; and it is that relationship between you and the object which is potentially the most touching thing to the audience’ (‘About’).

In all of Improbable’s productions mentioned above, there was no attempt to conceal the object’s original identity or function. Nor was there an attempt to mute the sounds of the stretching sticky tape or the crumpling noise of the newspaper, even in *Satyagraha* with the risk of interrupting the flow of music and the concentration of singers. The industrial and prosaic appearance of the materials predominating in the visual style of *Satyagraha* were allowed to clash with the luxurious, gilded auditorium of the Coliseum, challenging the common opulent aesthetics expected in a large-scale opera production. The objects' characteristics were accepted and incorporated into the stage spectacle as they were, adding to the richness of the emerging narrative. This allows the objects to shift between familiarity and defamiliarity; between being the functional objects that they are (newspaper or sticky tape) and also transgressing that functionality simultaneously (becoming fantastic figures and stage objects). Kantor negotiated such tension when using old, discarded objects at the centre of his work, such as broken umbrellas, old wardrobes, decaying wheels and doors, among other 'poor objects.' In effect, this creates an experience of duality for spectators in which objects constantly transform before their eyes. Audiences are provoked to see one reality, while also being able to see another. The object; its identity, its history, the reality from which it was detached, are present, and so are the new 'realities' it evokes on stage. It is '[t]o agree that what we see is a newspaper that imparts information to us about the world but it's also a material that is potentially lots of other things' (McDermott, 'Newspaper').

The idea of 'respecting,' and being responsive to materials, are at the heart of Improbable's approach to a creative process and to actor training. The relationship between an actor and an object for them is often seen as a reflection of the relationship between a performer and the others. In their practice, they consistently try to finds ways where 'we and the material play with each other, the same as onstage we want to be on stage with each other and play with each other' (McDermott, 'Newspaper'). Their thoughts on this issue are often articulated in terms that emphasise the object as an 'entity,' with a presence and demands that should not be overtaken by those of the human performer, but that should be balanced alongside them. They openly declare their ‘love of materials and objects’ (McDermott and Crouch, ‘Puppetry’), calling for a sense of humility in the performer’s relationship to them:

> For example the performer’s ability to be with the object before you are touching it physically. The performer’s ability to send herself out to the object. To imagine that she is already touching it. What would it feel like? What would it be like? What would its texture be when she actually touches it. (McDermott and Crouch, ‘Puppetry’)

This form of ‘devotional’ attitude towards objects that they express is reminiscent of what is expected to occur between human performers. In a comment on a popular exercise often performed by the company with newspaper sheets, which will be described in the following section, McDermott describes the relationship with objects as ‘devotional.’ He argues that if a performer does not show a form of respect for newspaper when she/he starts to play with it, the object’s capability to create spirits and great stories will not be activated (‘Newspaper’). To enable an object to have a life on stage, McDermott declares, ‘you have to develop a compassion for objects and materials in the same way that you have to develop compassion for your friends on stage’ (‘About’).

Putting the performer and the object in a similar category is not intended as a naïve analogy that subjugates human agency. The analogy expressed by McDermott resonates with the notion of the ‘agency’ of things articulated in discourses of material culture, and that implies investing things with personality, transformation, embodied biographies and some of the intentionality and efficacy of their human creators and users. All of these factors need to be considered when working with objects in order for them to have impact and open up different worlds. In other words, ‘we are dealing with entities that do not just sit in silence waiting to be embodied with socially constituted meanings, but possess their own unique qualities and competences which they bring to our cohabitation (and co-constitution) with them’ (Olsen 92). This is proven in the makers’ ability to ‘listen’ to mere sticky tape and accommodate what it has to offer to the creative process, which led to the big spectacle that is *Sticky*, and the same applies to the newspaper in *Satyagraha*. It is a manifestation of Bjørnar Olsen’s provocation to become sensitive to the way things ‘*articulate themselves*’ and to respond to their call (98). This impulse, and its wider implications in the interactions between humans, is extended in the company’s teaching philosophy, which can be identified in a specific exercise, well known to the company and to those familiar with their rehearsals and workshops. In that exercise, newspaper sheets become like partners and co-performers, suggesting that an interaction with physical objects entails a sense of responsibility that has roots in the encounter between a human being and another.

3.7.1. The ‘Newspaper Exercise’

It is one of the company’s key improvisation exercises that they introduce as basis for most of their devising and workshops. Respect, sensitivity and the willingness to learn from and collaborate with the ‘other’ (whether it is a human performer or an object) manifest themselves most clearly in that exercise. This section starts by briefly describing the exercise, focusing on the subject-object interplay at its core. The exercise is rich and multilayered, aiming at achieving various objectives, often with unpredictable outcomes. It also requires enough time and acute awareness of a multiplicity of parameters in order for it to be effective. Due to space limitations, the exercise is not given justice in this section, only giving a general idea of its common sequence, and selecting the instances that serve the issue I am raising.

The exercise often starts with a group of participants, each given an individual full sheet of newspaper placed open flat on the floor. Before physically touching the paper, participants are asked to observe it and to try to see it as both the newsprint, with printed pictures and words, and also as something other than that, and back again into seeing it as newspaper, and so on. Then they try to imagine themselves touching it before actually doing so. The first moment of touching the flat sheets following from that is like the first instance of an encounter, marked by a combination of curiosity, fascination and caution. Participants are then invited to explore the paper, which tends to be playful, with an open attitude like that of a child exploring the world. Each participant follows the shapes, rhythms, movements and sounds the object initiates. Rather than dominating the object by imposing certain actions and shapes, participants are encouraged to remain receptive to what might emerge from their interaction with it; to observe how the object itself and its special attributes may suggest different action and movement. McDermott notes,

> Notice when you dominate the newspaper, notice when you try and make it do or be something, notice when it wants to do something. This is basically the same game again when we decide which way the scene is going and someone else decides it's going in a different direction – we have to have this negotiation. ('Newspaper')

The exploration leads to the paper 'coming to life' and taking part in a 'democratic' interplay with the human performer. This marks the moment when the journey of the paper starts to happen and to create stories. After spending some time working individually with the sheets of paper, participants' awareness would then be opened up externally to include the others in the space, which can lead to ensemble improvisation that occupies a larger space. Participants, along with their newspaper sheets now forming figures, meet and interact with each other. Their individual figures may form a dialogue with other figures in pairs, or they may gradually meet more figures and merge into larger ones. Often the exercise culminates in all the smaller paper figures morphing into one, with the participants jointly animating it in a sequence of group improvisations. Some of the parameters that participants are encouraged to be aware of while performing this exercise are: gravity (if a figure leaves the ground it marks a significant statement); polarities (being aware of everything that is happening, or may happen, in the space); movement qualities (based on Michael Chekhov's idea, which will be presented later in this chapter); the change from individual to ensemble work; the object's focus and its centre; and the participants' shift back and forth between being visible and being invisible, which does not imply physically hiding as I will explain below.

Another version of that exercise is practiced on a long table by two to six individuals following a similar process to the one described above, with the table's surface becoming the space of performance. The exercise can lead to a tabletop performance or it can go beyond the table's surface, breaking the performance-audience boundary. At one point during *Satyagraha*'s rehearsals, the tabletop exercise was practiced with everyday objects instead of newspaper sheets, which generated a different dynamic of performance. The characteristics and the properties of the solid objects, and the history of domestic usage embodied in them, asserted a strong presence and influenced the emerging narrative. Nevertheless, when working with the object in that exercise, whether it is newspaper sheets or an everyday object, the improvisatory dynamic is understood as a dialogue of physical language and actions exchanged between the performer and the material where both are considered as partners. As McDermott and Crouch put it,

> If the material is dominated by the performer then we get the feeling that the object or the material does not get given an opportunity to speak or to "Have its say." We are looking for our work with objects to be as stimulating as two performers working onstage together. If one performer were to dominate the other onstage then it could be a troubling interaction. We can begin to worry about the other performer and whether they are enjoying themselves. The same is true for our objects. If the object is given space then it has some life. If the puppeteer is too dominant then it doesn't even get the opportunity to be born. ('Puppetry')

McDermott argues that one of the fundamental conditions for this exercise to productively communicate to the audience is to engage with the idea that 'it's the newspaper that has a life of its own,' and that the role of the performer is to 'facilitate' it to become manifest and to help the audience read the stories it is evoking ('Newspaper'). The ability to respond to the demands of the object; to see it as a thing that 'has a "life" of its own, characteristics of its own, which we must incorporate into our activities in order to be effective,' produces engaging dynamics in the performance space (Grosz, 'The Thing' 125). To achieve this, a performer needs to connect to the paper on a primary level, preceding the actual physical contact (McDermott, 'Newspaper'), which is related to how a performer approaches the space around the object. Implied in this statement is a double, internal-external awareness where a performer is encouraged to send aspects of the self into the object—which is not equal to mimetically *projecting* the subjectivities of performer and spectator onto it as in conventional object animation, it is more about maintaining a sense of spatial-sensorial connection with it—while also remaining detached to allow the object's own qualities to reveal themselves and contribute to the narrative. This involves having two points of perception: being the thing itself, trying to imagine how it looks like from the outside, and also being separate from it (McDermott, 'Newspaper'). It also implies seeing the 'double reality' of the object as discussed above, and that shifts the object back and forth between being the familiar printed paper and also being something that goes beyond that familiarity and enters imaginary realms.

Various sequences of the tabletop newspaper exercise during the research and development period showed how the presence of the object simultaneously shifts in relation to the performer, which is partly down to how it is perceived and approached by her/him. By observing the exercise from the outside, at some points, it seemed that a performer's presence recedes to the background, putting the object centre stage where its characteristics and potentials as a performing material become emphasised. This happens when the material's presence is acknowledged and allowed to manifest itself. At other points when the material is dominated, the performer as a character or as a person comes to the forefront, and the object in her/his hands returns back to being a passive utility, but soon the dynamic shifts back to the former state, and so on. It is what the makers and performers refer to as negotiating the change between 'visibility' and 'invisibility' of performers in relation to the object, which is a result of the shift in their attitude towards it, not of physically 'hiding' behind it. The shifting relationship between subject and object creates multiple and various stories, taking the newspaper on transformational journeys that can be epic, poetic, comical, violent, exciting or dull, all in the same sequence. This is aided by the shifting focus of the performer in relation to the object, and how her/his attitude towards it changes back and forth between 'facilitation' and domination; or between 'being' the thing and also being detached from it.

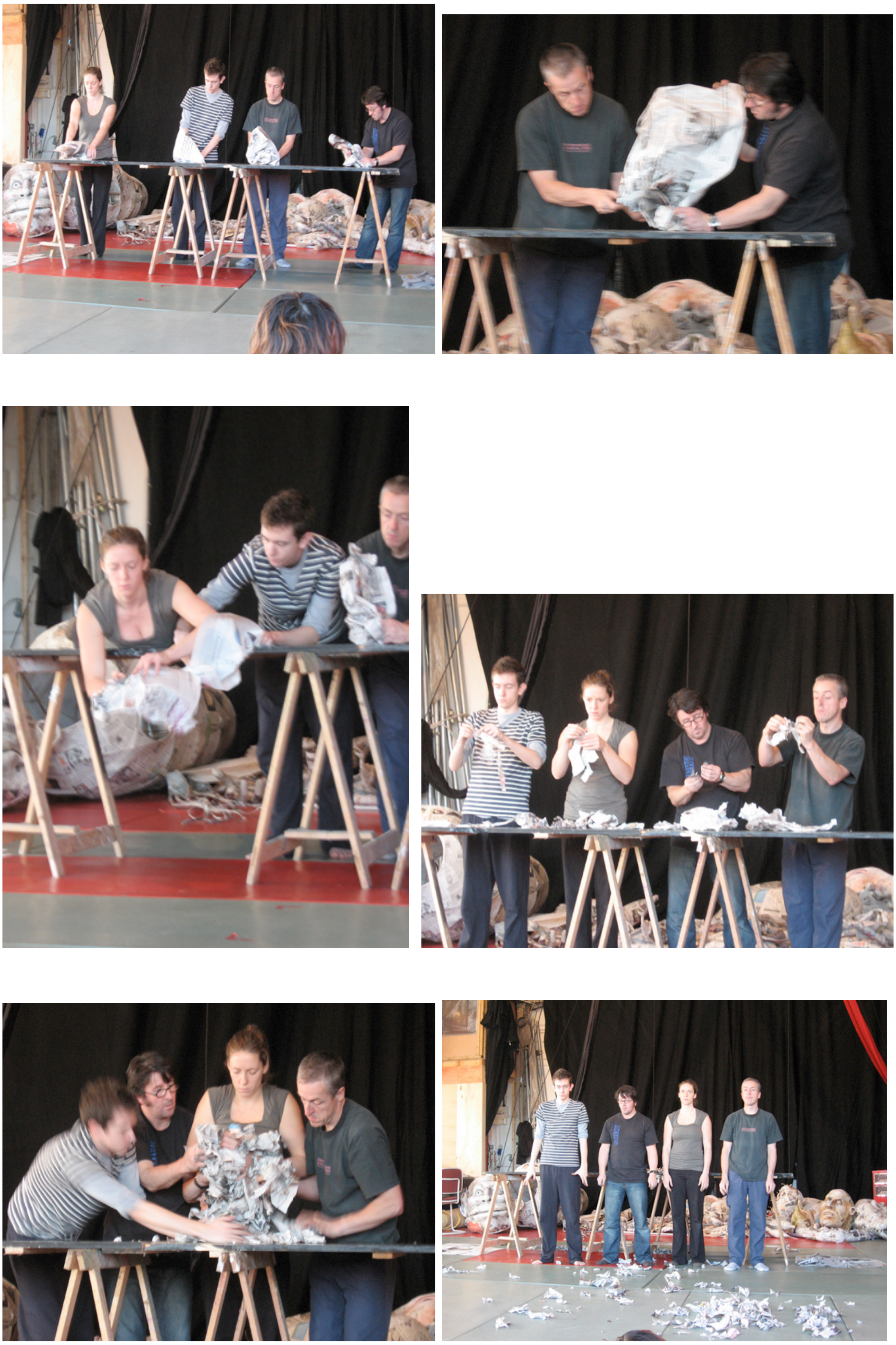

Fig. 29. A sequence of improvisations during the newspaper exercise practiced by the Skills Ensemble on a tabletop. Research and Development. The Hangar Circus Space, London (2006). Photos by Nesreen Hussein

When taking part in that exercise, I found it difficult to detach myself from the object at first. My controlling, analytic mind that often resists being in the 'unknown' came in the way and stopped me from attentively 'listening' to the object, or from being sensitive to its dynamic characteristics. My initial tendency was to force the paper into recognisable forms and familiar patterns of movement, which was not satisfying for me, nor was it engaging for the audience. An awkward sense of struggle overwhelmed the action. It seemed as if the paper 'refused' to submit to what I was trying to make it do, and I felt somehow intimidated by it; as if the paper has asserted its presence and resisted my tyranny. McDermott notes that in this exercise, there can be moments that 'you see when you can't control the newspaper – that's what's great about it, you can't actually make it do what you want it to do. You see people dealing with the moments when people notice that the paper rips, or when they are noticing that "it" is doing something quite interesting' ('Newspaper').

One of the comments I received to overcome this struggle was to 'let go' of my control, and to allow things to reveal themselves, rather than forcing them to happen. On another level, it was easy to become immersed in the object I was working with, which disconnected me from the other performers and from my awareness of the entire action in the space (demonstrating a lack of a sense of the 'polarities'). It took me several attempts before actually occupying a position in between self and object; between being 'with' the object, and being liberated from my controlling, impatient impulses. Engaging in such open and balanced negotiation with the object was a pleasing and productive experience for myself as a performer and for the audience. The paper yielded to my touch, and my propositions were returned by surprising possibilities. Another participant in the exercise, who is an actor and a member of the Skills Ensemble, also noticed how his first impulse in his first contact with the paper was to crumple it in his grip into a ball, thus completely dominating it and silencing its potential. While another member of the Ensemble; an actor and a puppeteer, realised that by being receptive to the paper, it created and mobilised his journey during the performance. This proved that ‘the conscious mind actually takes our attention away from where the action is happening,’ as McDermott observes (McCaw, ‘Claire’ 12). Awareness of this can be a first step towards establishing a positive and a productive work framework in performance making, not just with objects, but also between performers.

My participation in and observation of the newspaper exercise shed some light on the company’s belief that a performer’s interaction with materials can function as an externalisation of her/his attitude towards others and towards the outside world, which eventually affects the audience. How a performer interacts with and treats the object, for them, is an indicator of how she/he would treat other performers and also her/himself during the creative process (McDermott and Crouch, ‘Puppetry’). This way of looking at working with things is raised by their perception of the object as an active element that demands a relationship with a human performer based on responsibility, compassion and humility. McDermott argues, for example, that the newspaper, the material, ‘has some demands and a right to have its say: it wants to play too’ (McDermott, ‘Newspaper’). A relationship to such object is informed by sensitivity to subtle impulses and sensations, ‘so you don’t just grab the newspaper and try and make a puppet out of it, you find out what your inner, more essential impulses are in relation to that object’ (McDermott, ‘Newspaper’).[53] My personal experience showed that adopting this approach towards physical things may not be readily available for some; it needs some level of practice. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, social relations and cultural identities become objectified in the things humans create and interact with. Thus a link can be traced between the manner of production and social interactions, as identified in the newspaper exercise. This is a useful analogy for performance making that helps in finding ways of developing training and enhancing performance. The newspaper exercise can be helpful as a tool for performer and ensemble-based training, which is why it is used by the company at the beginning of a devising process and in various educational and community contexts beyond the theatre.[54] In addition to what is already mentioned above, this exercise can aid in developing democratic work dynamics in collaborative contexts; the ability to let go of the ego and of attachments to the centrality of the artist as *the* creator; as well as developing forms of puppetry that are not dominated by a controlling subject as in some conventional practices. In other words, it offers an opportunity to rediscover that 'knowledge exists on the threshold and in the interaction between subject and object [which are themselves only hypostatisations…]' (George, *Buddhism* 34). These modes of productive negotiation between performers and objects that invest in the potential and material qualities of the latter were traced in other uses of objects during the early research and development stages of *Satyagraha*. The following section describes other improvisation games and exercises using objects and puppet parts created for the

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[53] This approach differs from conventional forms of object animation mentioned in Chapter One that often foster a hierarchical attitude towards physical objects. The approach to interacting with objects

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in the newspaper exercise is noticeably different from my experience in the puppetry workshop with Finn Caldwell of Blind Summit theatre mentioned in footnote number 3 in the Introduction. In the latter, the work with objects focused on mimetic representation and characterisation, while the emphasis in Improbable's work shifts away from that direction into an investment in the object's own material characteristics, and in the sensitivities of the dynamic between the performer and the object.

[54] They sometimes use it in workshops with people whose professions are product-oriented, such as in business, design or puppetry (Crouch, Research and Development).

opera. These practices take the ideas and principles introduced in the newspaper exercise further, pushing them more towards generating images and narratives for the production itself.

3.7.2. 'Finding the Game': Improvising with Objects

During the research and development period, the object provided access to that stage of the devising process in a series of games and improvisations with random parts of figures that Crouch created in advance. The parts consisted of a collection of limbs, animal and human heads and masks, torsos, sheets of newspaper and other abstract structures. It is what the company refers to as the 'kit.' McDermott and Crouch explain,

> We usually call our puppetry kit the 'Bosch Kit' (after the painter Hieronymus Bosch). It dates from the first production we did together, *Doctor Faustus*, were we used our kit of human and animal body parts to dramatise the Seven Deadly Sins. Our ensemble would put random elements together and improvise with them in rehearsals and this process continued until we had successfully identified each one. In this way we ensure that our puppets are not fully finished until they are in front of an audience - puppet making is not completed on the maker's workbench. ('Puppetry')

They often create a kit for every production they make, which they improvise with during the devising process. The parts of a kit are considered as found objects for the use of the collaborators, and they are not necessarily created with predetermined usage. For example in *Satyagraha*, a cow's head ended up as the torso of one of the warrior figures at one point. Gloves with extended pointy fingers became fins of a fish. Hands were sometimes used in the improvisations as feet. Animal heads were created with no specific, apparent, reason. The process was playful, and the objects were not used as representational or typically modeled on organic forms. But not all of those objects were put together randomly, some of them responded to early decisions, such as deciding beforehand on including a figure of a cow in one scene, or a group of large, grotesque puppets in another, which appear in Crouch's first design drawings. That is why a cow's head and various other human heads were parts of the kit, but the assemblage of the final figures on stage was left open to be explored by the collaborators during the research and development. The makers would have an idea of a final image, but the journey towards realising it, and the consequent narratives and meanings emerging from it, would be discovered during the group devising. Thus, the devising process during the research and development period did not start from nothing, but a balance was struck between making early decisions and maintaining flexibility throughout the process of realising them.

Many of the work principles that marked that process echo Keith Johnstone's teachings of creative making that foster ideas of play and spontaneity, in addition to accepting failure and mistakes; embracing the most 'obvious' ideas as the most 'original;' making and accepting propositions rather than blocking them; balancing between knowing and unknowing as productive ways of mobilising action and generating narratives, most of which are proposed in Johnstone's well-known book *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (1989). Most of the improvisation exercises consisted of responding to what the members of the group proposed to each other and to what the objects added, which is based on Johnstone's principle of 'blocking and accepting' offers. As he puts it, 'I call anything that an actor does an "offer". Each offer can either be accepted, or blocked. If you yawn, your partner can yawn too, and therefore *accept* your offer. A block is anything that prevents the action from developing, or that wipes out your partner's premise' (97). This principle was negotiated during the process in what is sometimes referred to as ‘finding the game.’ This is a phrase that is commonly used by the company, especially during rehearsals, to describe an improvisatory structure where members of a group identify and respond to an impulse or a proposition initiated by any of them, using it as a basis for a game to be shared by all. The response could be either by following a proposition, countering it or adding to it, but not by blocking it. These games play a part in generating narratives and scenes, ‘[s]cenes spontaneously generate themselves if both actors offer and accept alternately’ (Johnstone 99). The following examples demonstrate how this was applied in a series of group exercises and games during the research and development period, incorporating objects as integral parts of the process.

One exercise started with six performers buried under a large pile of objects and newspaper sheets. They maintained awareness of the whole group, being perceptive to any change that may occur in their dynamic and in the space in between them. One performer started to emerge from underneath the rubble, and the rest responded to her movement. Using the principle of offering and accepting, they started to interact with the objects around them, which led to the creation of fantastic figures, jointly animated by the group without prescribed choreography.

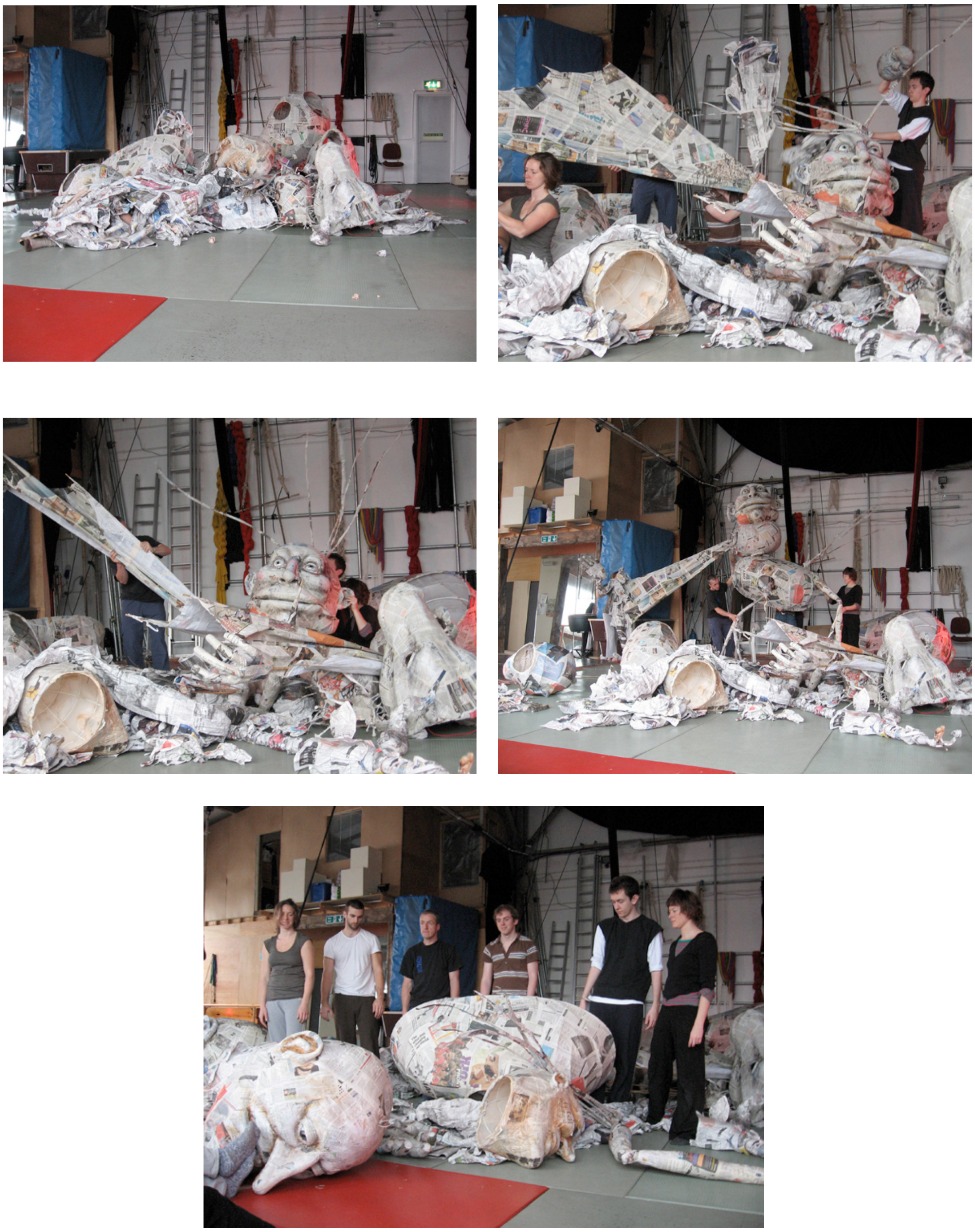

Fig. 30. A sequence from the improvisatory exercise. Research and Development. The Hangar Circus Space, London (2006). Photos by Nesreen Hussein

Another improvisatory sequence was a version of the newspaper exercise described above, but using one large sheet of paper for a group of seven performers. They gradually started to interact with the paper while being aware of each other. They were encouraged to identify the ‘game,’ trust their impulses, and follow what may emerge out of the group action. At one point, they all started to roll the newspaper sheet into one long tube. A piece of paper got accidentally torn. Instead of considering it as a mistake, the action was accepted and incorporated into the improvisation, so the rest of the paper tube was torn into flat pieces. Johnstone argues that '[o]nce you learn to accept offers, then accidents can no longer interrupt the action' (100). The tearing of the paper became the 'game' that performers found in their bodies and that they silently accepted in that instance. The torn pieces were gathered together and some kind of an extended figure emerged. Someone from outside the group lowered the cow's head that was suspended from above, they attached the long paper figure to it and it became the body of a cow; it became the start of another game. The paper tube was rolled on the floor again, and the improvisations carried on incorporating sounds and structures from the surrounding environment, following other emerging games until the group collectively decided to reach an ending. All of the sequences occurred mainly as a result of following Johnstone's principle, which generated scenes and narratives without preplanning, giving the impression of a fully rehearsed scene at times. 'Good improvisers seem telepathic;' argues Johnstone, 'everything looks prearranged. This is because they accept all offers made' (99).

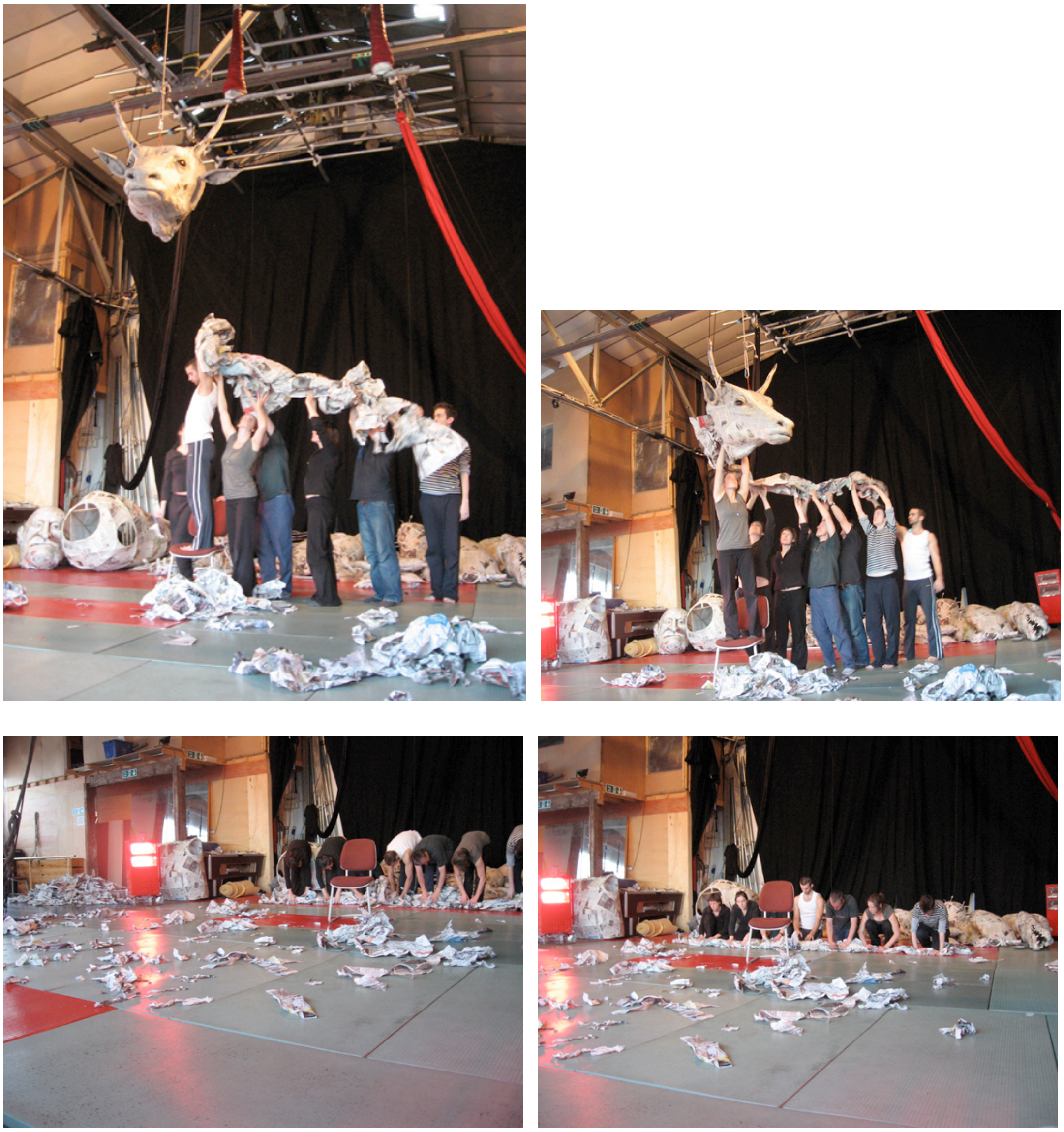

Fig. 31. A sequence from the improvisations with newspaper. Research and Development. The Hangar Circus Space, London (2006). Photos by Nesreen Hussein

When taking part in some of those improvisations, a great sense of connection was felt between performers. A powerful form of physical communication was quickly established, in spite of not knowing each other well at that point. Once an offer was given, an endless series of possibilities emerged, with a satisfying sense of productivity in following them. In those cases, accidents such as the tearing of paper no longer interrupt the action. Everything would seem as if meant to happen if accepted and included. The object's characteristics thus become part of the action. Through its material quality that is accepted and incorporated, the object contributes to the improvisatory dynamic, claiming an active role as part of the ensemble. While observing those improvisations from the outside, it was noted that the interactions with objects exceed the dynamic of conventional object animation or puppetry as defined in Chapter One. The object does not remain a passive recipient of the performers' impulses, it becomes an element that actively connects the performers together and communicates a story. Robert Thirtle, a member of the Skills Ensemble, thinks that 'the thing that unites us the most in this is the manipulation of objects, which sometimes tips over into puppetry, and other times it's just manipulating materials, mainly newspaper' ('Reimagining'). Throughout the interactions between performers and objects, a constant shift of focus between them occurred. Performers were not always 'hiding' behind the object, which would emphasise their authority as 'invisible puppeteers;' both were sharing the same visual field as partners exchanging roles and presences.

Not all of the narratives and images generated during those exercises were included in the staging of the opera. However, they were crucial for building awareness of group work and awareness of the qualities underlying the performers' movement. The exercises also established an embodied understanding of what is expected from the Skills Ensemble in terms of performance values, style of action and their embedded principles. The newspaper exercise was essential for establishing the attitude and ways of approaching objects during the performance. The opening scene in the opera, for example, started from an initiative similar to that in the newspaper exercise, particularly in the performers' first contact with the paper. Other improvisations were structured to create specific figures and images, such as the figures of the cow and the crocodile; the fighting warriors and the choreography of their battle; the grotesque puppets and their movement styles; and the transformative construction of an icon that seems to represent the Hindu deity Ganesh. In addition to the details of the figures, those improvisations moved towards identifying ways of choreographing the actions, locating their movement qualities and creatively solving logistical or technical problems, which were then incorporated as part of the onstage action. These improvisations started in the research and development weeks, then they went into the rehearsals and kept slightly altering even after the opening, with every member of the creative team and the Ensemble contributing to the process.

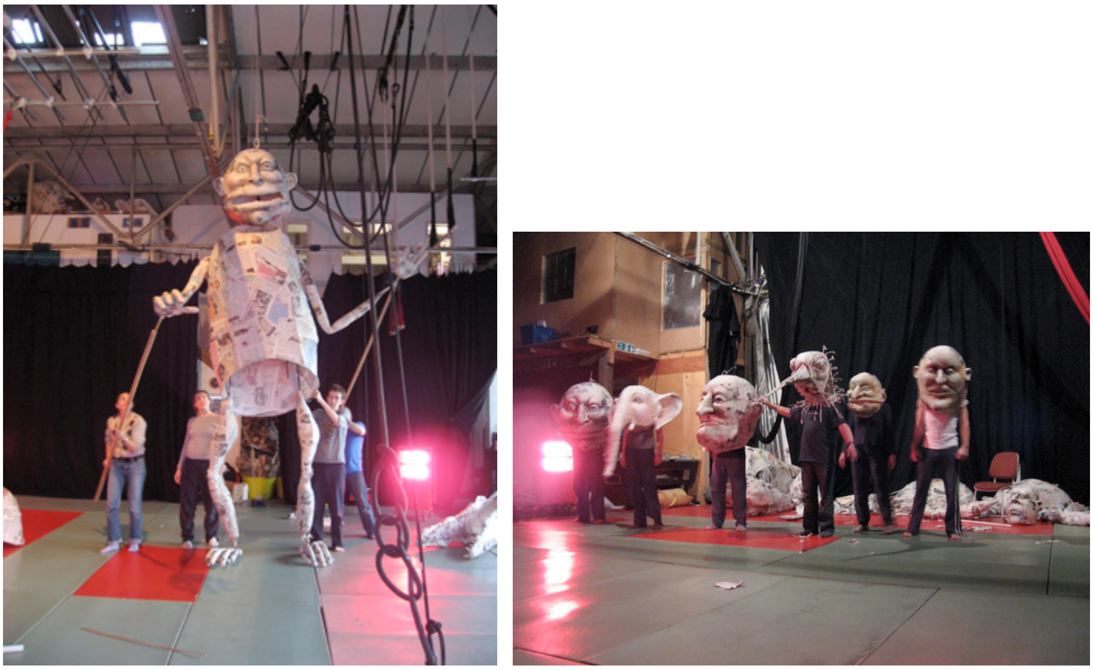

Fig. 32. Early stages of improvisations with the 'kit.' Research and Development. The Hangar Circus Space, London (2006). Photos by Nesreen Hussein

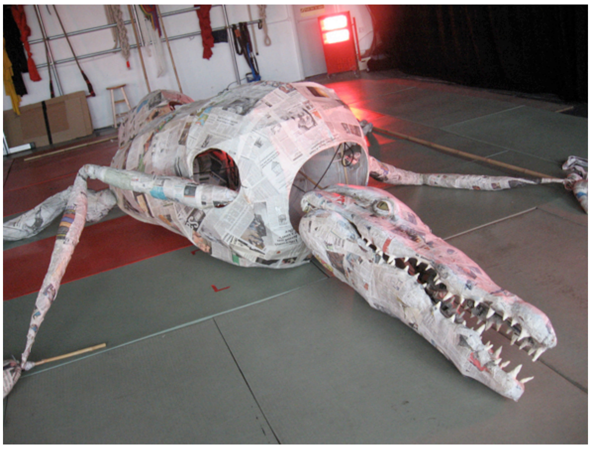

Fig. 33. Early stages of improvisations with the 'kit.' Research and Development. The Hangar Circus Space, London (2006). Photo by Nesreen Hussein

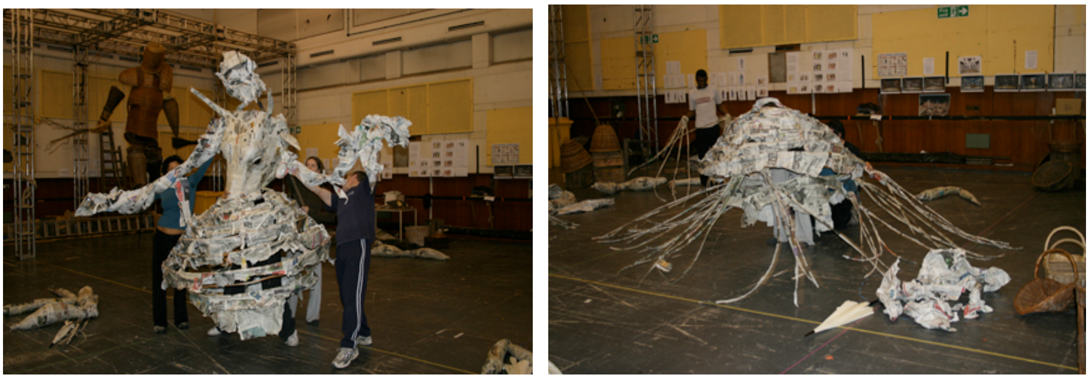

Fig. 34. The early stages of experimenting with the construction and transformation of one of the 'warriors' figures. ENO, London (2007). Photos by Nesreen Hussein

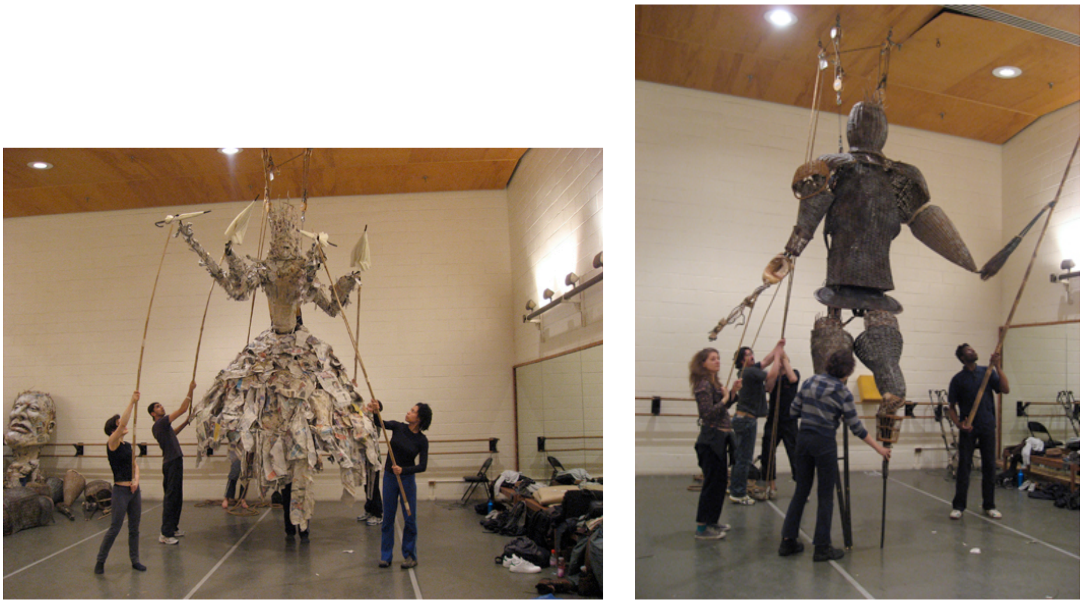

Fig. 35. Experimenting with the animation of the 'warriors' figures in Act I, Scene 1. Metropolitan Opera, New York (2008). Photos by Nesreen Hussein

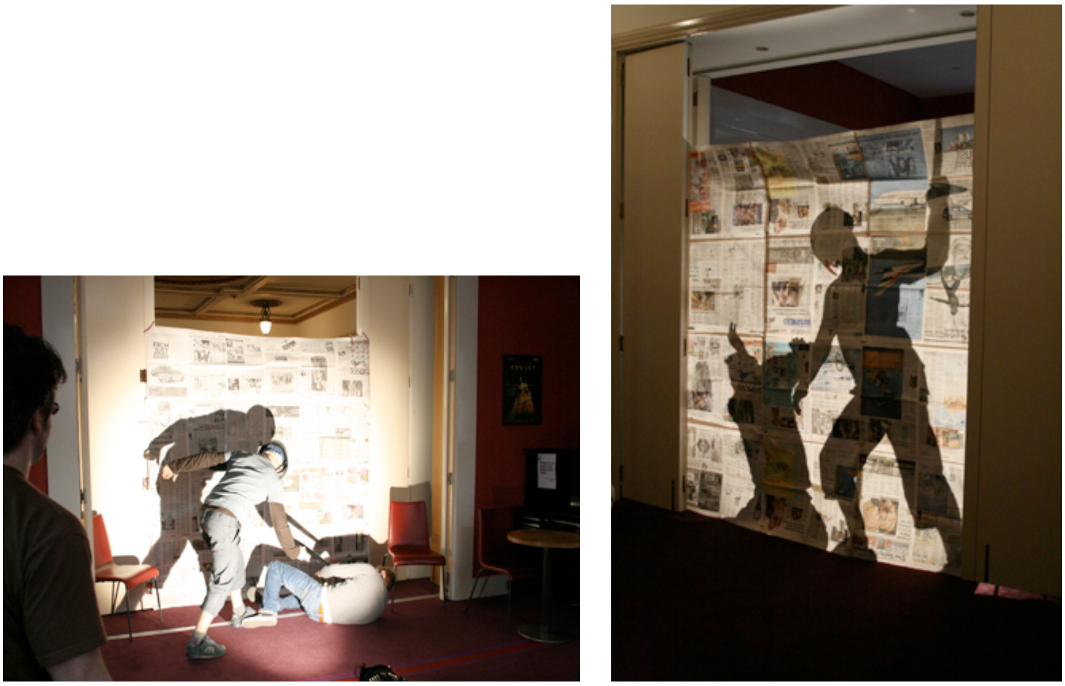

Fig. 36. Devising the 'shadow fight' scene in Act III. ENO, London (2007). Photos by Nesreen Hussein

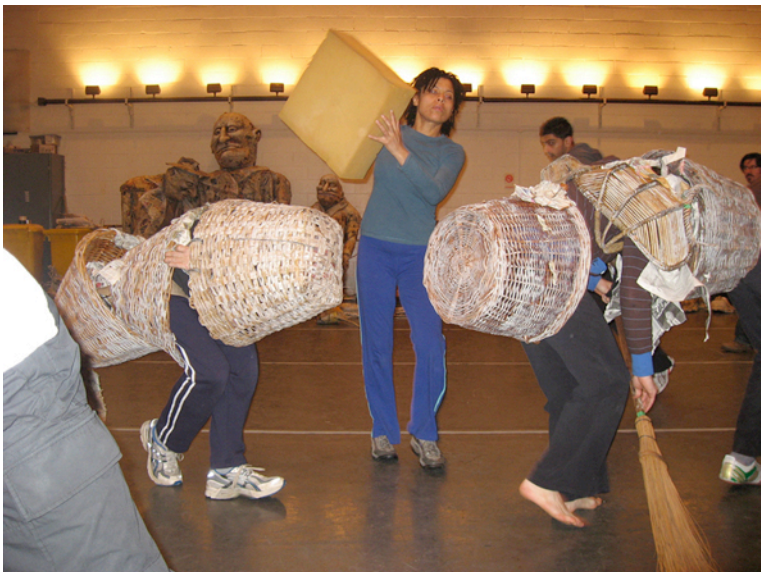

Fig. 37. Devising the moment of dismantling the crocodile figure in Act I, Scene 3. ENO, London (2007). Photo by Nesreen Hussein

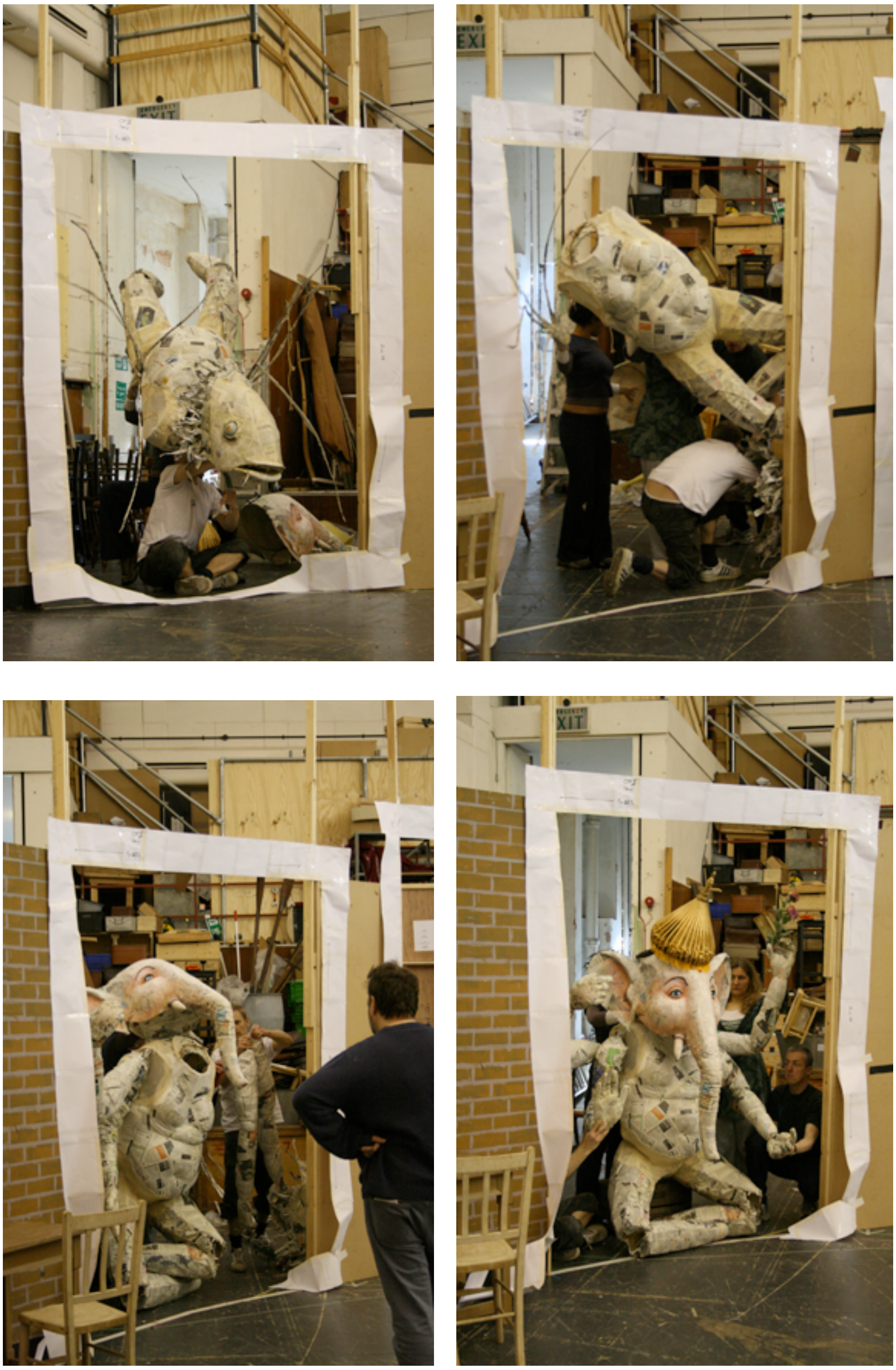

Fig. 38. Devising the transformation of a figure from a fish into the Hindu deity Ganesh in Act II, Scene 3. ENO, London (2007). Photos by Nesreen Hussein

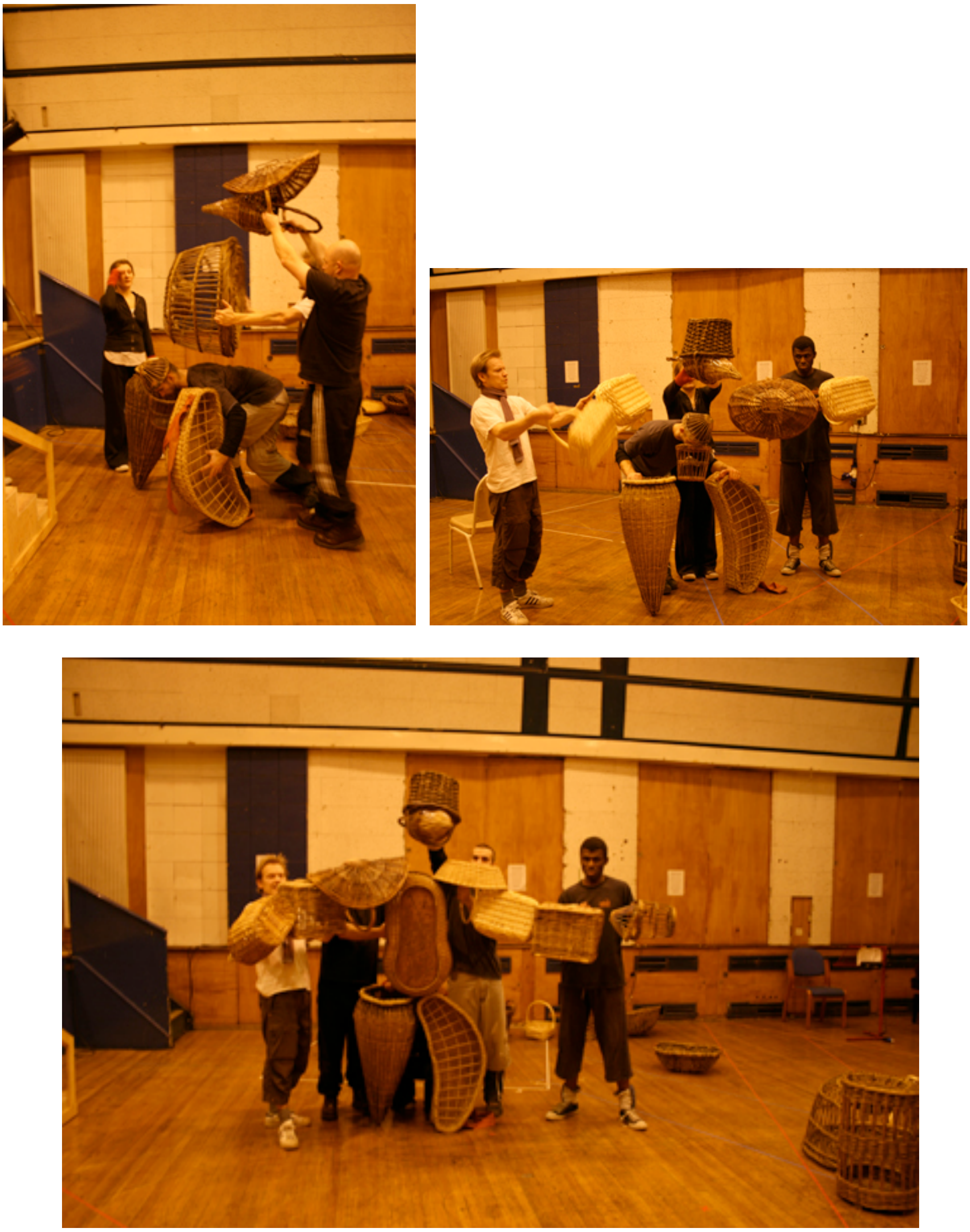

Fig. 39. Improvisations with baskets and wicker objects to devise the first stage of one of the warriors in Act I, Scene 1. ENO, London (2007). Photos by Nesreen Hussein

The journey of creation on stage retained a space for change to prevent the mechanisation of action, which is part of the productions' continuous strength over the years. However meticulously rehearsed and choreographed the piece ended up, an essential aspect of its staging is its improvisational quality, which is possibly one of the reasons why it remained fresh and vital to a large extent for the audience after performing it in three separate years. The revivals of the production retained the quality of a present act rather than a reconstruction of something dated. As in Caridad Svich's comment on *Shockheaded Peter*, 'it is McDermott and Crouch's Improbable Theatre aesthetic that shapes the present-tense aspect of their work. The spirit of liveness is crucial to what they do, and emblematic of the way they work on material, be it Shakespeare, a Sellotape figure, or Hoffman's book' (49).

Preserving a 'present-tense' state of a work is the main drive behind the company's relationship to working with the written text, which is seen as a material open for physical negotiation. In *Satyagraha* this was enhanced by its sung libretto and by engaging with a language like an object, which will be explained in the following part of this chapter. The next discussion moves to a crucial aspect of *Satyagraha*'s staging, in which a similar impulse to working with objects is evident in working with the text. I look at the text in this production as an object of improvisation that is open for negotiation, which breaks out of its authority as a prescriber of meanings and action. To illustrate this idea, I will describe certain moments from the rehearsal process of *Satyagraha* which propose ways of generating action, imagery and narratives that are not conditioned by the word, which differs from conventional modes of practice that often rely on a written score. This shows that the idea of objectification is not restricted to physical objects or human bodies; it can also include a text or a written score. However, the mode of 'objectifying a language' has its problems, namely, the danger of alienating a culturally specific construct from its audience by utilising its otherness for theatrical values, as I will explain in the following discussion. The discussion starts by presenting the condition of the language in *Satyagraha* and how it is approached by the opera's author, Philip Glass. It then moves to Improbable's reconsideration of the domination of the word in most text-based theatre, showing how some of the company members negotiate the text in their productions. It finally looks at some ways of creating parts of the narrative and action in the making of *Satyagraha*, which was a physical-led process that occurred through a series of exercises and improvisations not bound by the word.

3.8. The Objectification of Language in *Satyagraha*

The question of language and its use in the libretto of *Satyagraha* is a crucial aspect of its making. All of the vocal text in the opera is taken from the *Bhagavad-Gita,* one of the significant texts that played a part in forming Gandhi's ideas and actions. Appropriate verses from the text are correlated to the actions, selected according to Gandhi's own view and use of the *Gita* as documented in his writings. Text and action are not mutually illustrative elements in the opera, they constitute two parallel narratives in sequence (DeJong and Glass 39, 40). The text does not so much drive the action as comment upon it; it is left to the staging and to the audience to construct the story. The music itself consists of series of repeated motifs, or what Glass describes as 'repeated structures' (Mendelsohn), in addition to the use of plain scales and arpeggios instead of composing phrases and themes with them, which can have a meditative effect on the listener, or it can be a source of frustration for some. Tim Ashley in *The Guardian* remarks that '[t]he repetitive figurations of Glass's music, meanwhile, act like mantras, and aim to quieten the jangling of our own minds as we watch and listen' (Ashley). The hypnotic repetition of phrases is a trademark stylistic trait of Glass's music that is partly a product of the influence of

Eastern music on his work.[55] Daniel Mendelsohn explains, ‘Glass’s music drama was “doing” something in a rather more Eastern mode—as if the mantric repetitions of the music were a kind of meditative medium (as they can indeed be, in Eastern religions) for achieving a kind of spiritual heightening’ (Mendelsohn). This also contributes to the distancing effect the music has on some listeners who are accustomed to Western modes of music and opera construction. Writing the entire libretto in Sanskrit heightened that sense of estrangement, even for those familiar with the language. Displacing the Eastern language within a primarily Western musical form (even if it is partly influenced by Eastern musical traditions) defamiliarises the language and distorts its function as a communication device.[56] In a post-performance discussion at the English National Opera in London where *Satyagraha* was premiered in 2007, an audience member complained that she was expecting to hear the ‘authentic’ language, but could not recognise the text in the opera even though she knew Sanskrit, questioning the pronunciation; its accuracy and how it sounded.[57] However, Glass was aware that he is objectifying a language, and did not intend to use the Sanskrit as an illustrative element.[58] Rather, he sees

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[55] Glass worked with the Indian musician and composer Ravi Shankar. Additionally, his travels to India reinforced his enthusiasm for music from that region, especially his understanding of Indian rhythm, in how it depends on the addition or subtraction of beats to develop a pattern. He is also concerned in his music with other non-Western cultures, collaborating with musicians from Africa and aboriginal Australia as well as India, and exploring subjects from ancient Egypt (*Akhnaten*), medieval Iran (*Monsters of Grace*) and ancient Mexico (*Toltec Symphony*) (Griffiths).

[56] This could be similarly said of Western operas that are translated into, and sung in, the Arabic language, where the language seems to sometimes jar with the Western structure of music.

[57] This was during a post-performance discussion with Phelim McDermott and Julian Crouch that I have attended at the English National Opera on the 7th of April, 2007.

[58] It would have been interesting to trace the responses of audiences of Indian origin to *Satyagraha*, but this aspect is not central to the thesis’s overall structure and its key questions, thus, this kind of survey did not designate an essential part of my research. Informal discussions, reviews and the presence of mostly admiring audience members, indicate that it was generally positively received. Co-performers mentioned an incident where some of their invited attendants, who are from Indian origin, complained from general issues, such as the incomprehensibility of the libretto, the incapability of identifying the represented characters and the opera’s over-length. No other complaints or overt criticism of cultural misuse or misrepresentation were reported or published, to the best of my knowledge at the time of writing this thesis.

Satyagraha as ‘almost a mute opera. It’s an opera where words aren’t spoken; they’re spoken but we don’t understand them’ (‘Video Interview’). Leaving the question of language aside in composing *Satyagraha*, Glass is more concerned with communicating meaning and constructing an image of a person through rebalancing elements of movement, images, text and music as material elements, than by focusing on direct interpretation through the text (Public Talk). He explains,

> I liked the idea of further separating the vocal text from the action. In this way, without an understandable text to contend with, the listener could let the words go altogether. The weight of “meaning” would then be thrown on to the music, the designs and the stage action. Secondly, since none of the national languages was going to be used, Sanskrit could then serve as a kind of international language for this opera. (qtd. in Clements)

He describes this way of looking at history as similar to viewing a book of photographs that we might choose not to see in sequential order. ‘Since we already know the story, we don’t really need to arrange it in a normal sequence,’ Glass argues (Interview 66). For him, operas are not history but poetry; they do not have to tell the truth (Public Talk). In a comment he made regarding another of his historical operas, Glass explained that he wants the audience to have an experience, which unlike traditional theatre, does not intend to reproduce reality, but which creates its own, new kind of reality:

> I’ve never felt that “reality” was well served in an opera house. And I think this is even more true when the subject of the opera is based on historical events. Surely those with a taste for historical facts and documentation would be better served in libraries where academic research is presumably reliable and readily available. The opera house is the arena of poetry par excellence, where the normal rules of historical research need not be applied and where, in the world of artistic imagination, a different kind of truth can be discovered. (qtd. in Mendelsohn)

Glass's comment in that instance narrows a view of traditional theatre to that which essentially reproduces reality in factual or documentary forms. There are examples of mainstream theatre productions that are based on historical facts but that do not resort to being forms of direct documentation.[59] However, the mediation between 'abstraction' and historical reality implied in his comment, and evident in the text of *Satyagraha*, contributes to the poetic quality evoked by the work. The audience is invited to construct their own readings of the opera and the history suggested within it by observing historical fragments in the form of a series of images, without necessarily knowing a literal interpretation of the sung text. An audience member observed how the opera's openness to multiple interpretations was partially enhanced by the Sanskrit, which endowed the opera with the quality of a poem.[60]

The directors' decision not to project surtitles above the stage, breaking with a convention of the English National Opera established since 2006, demonstrates a response to Glass's impulse in the use of language.[61] Instead of surtitles, a synopsis and a translation of the libretto were provided in the printed programme. Additionally, throughout the performance, names of some of the characters and translated parts from the libretto were projected onto the set and onto screens created out of newspaper, often held by the Skills Ensemble. In this way, spectators were encouraged to get a sense of the significance of each scene without having to take their eyes away from the stage, and by looking at a text well integrated into the images in brief and relevant moments of projection that 'hint' without telling a full story. A reviewer remarks how the texts 'occasionally projected on to the stage itself offer some assistance, but only in an alienating, Brechtian way' (Coghlan).

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[59] Verbatim theatre and productions derived from historical or political facts are a few examples of theatrical forms that are based on real life events, but that are imaginatively and inventively negotiating them.

[60] I am indebted to Dr Libby Worth for her comment.

[61] The use of surtitles was first introduced to the English National Opera in March 2006, despite all performances being sung in English. This was in response to a belief in audiences' demand to see the singers' words written above the stage as a way of gaining further access to a performance. In spite of provoking controversy, the ENO's artistic director at that time, Sean Doran, argued that such a decision was vital, for the audiences' enjoyment of the operas was 'being compromised' due to some inaudible lyrics in such a large auditorium ('English Operas').

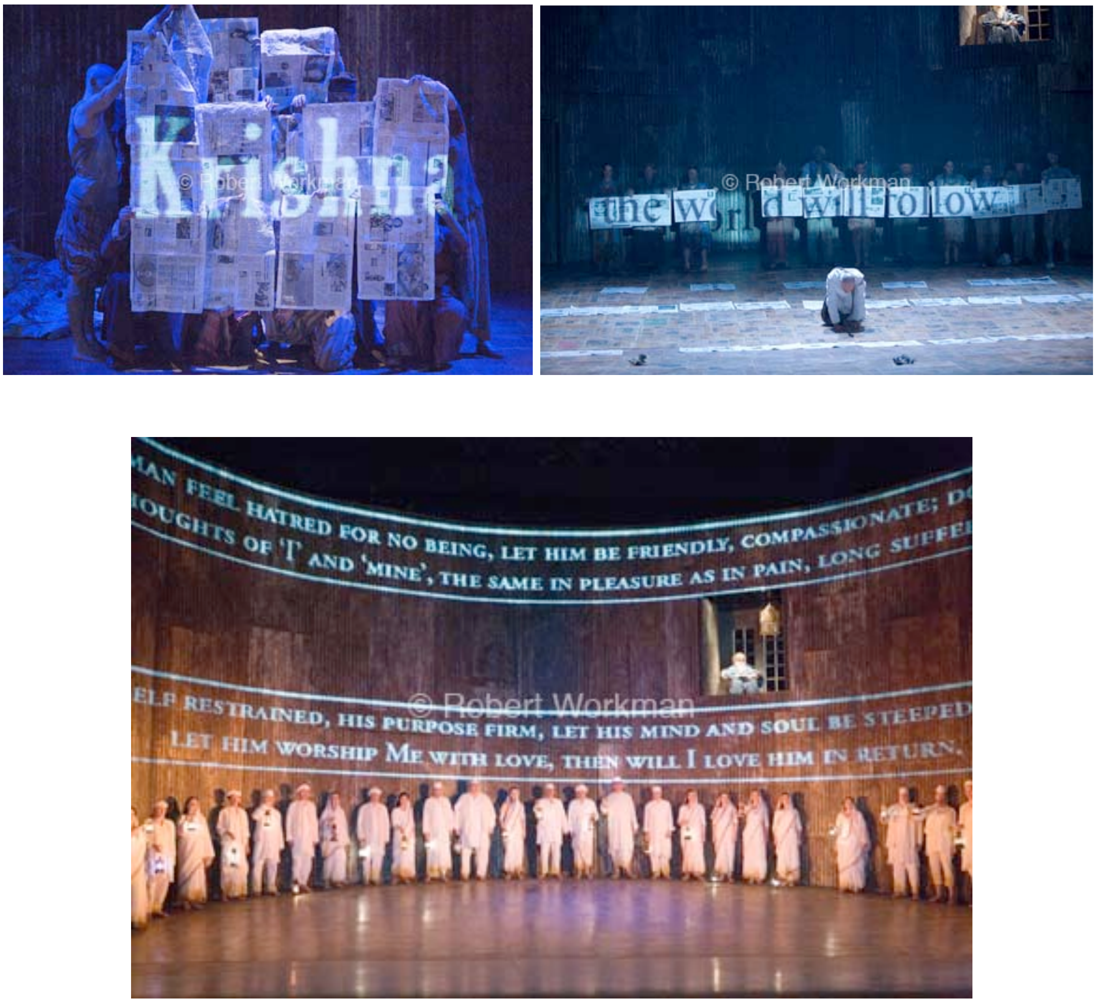
Krishna
© Robert Workman
the w d will follow
© Robert Workman
AN FEEL HATRED FOR NO BEING, LET HIM BE FRIENDLY, COMPASSIONATE; D
OUGHTS OF 'I' AND 'MINE', THE SAME IN PLEASURE AS IN PAIN, LONG SUFFE
© Robert Workman
ELF RESTRAINED, HIS PURPOSE FIRM, LET HIS MIND AND SOUL BE STEEPED
LET HIM WORSHIP ME WITH LOVE, THEN WILL I LOVE HIM IN RETURN.

Fig. 40. Text projections in various scenes. ENO, London (2007). Photos by Robert Workman

Projecting historical information and excerpts from the Sanskrit libretto in translation 'in an unattached, non-specific manner' is the makers' way of suggesting, rather than dictating to the audience ways of reading the work (McDermott and Crouch, 'Discussing'). In justifying this choice, the makers argue that providing direct translation of the entire text entails the possibility of conveying the wrong message to the audience (McDermott and Crouch, Public Talk). In other words, it can take part in dictating ways of receiving the opera, and stopping the audience from absorbing and contemplating the music and the action on stage, which goes against the intentions behind composing and staging it. Rather than making statements, they preferred to open spaces for alternative and multiple narratives. For McDermott, the surtitles seemed unnecessary, because the words 'don't relate on a surface level to what's happening.' He adds, 'it's more like how you would listen to a piece of religious music. You don't know literally what you're hearing at any one moment, but there's a kind of spiritual thing that's being communicated through it' (Taylor). It seems that McDermott is referring to religious music that is recited in a language unfamiliar to the listener. Thus, the intention from the staging is to create a liberating experience; 'a deep meditation on that one theme of Satyagraha,' as McDermott puts it ('Video Interview'). Because of that quality given to the opera by the music, the libretto and the staging, he believes that a spectator 'could almost enter the piece at any point and experience the whole thing' (qtd. in Holden).

The approach to the text adopted in writing the libretto indeed involves the audience as authors in constructing and reading the work; however, it entails a degree of exoticising a language by using it for its formalistic values, rather than for what it actually signifies. Timothy D. Taylor defines 'exoticism,' particularly in music, as 'manifestations of an awareness of racial, ethnic, and cultural Others captured in sound' (2). While Jonathan Bellman suggests that 'it may be defined as the borrowing or use of musical materials that evoke distant locales or alien frames of reference' (ix). Both definitions, even though they focus on the use of musical forms, may apply to some modes of employing non-Western languages within the boundaries of Western musical mediums. Glass's engagement with the Sanskrit in *Satyagraha* displays the claim of one social group's ownership to the power of representation while denying it to others, who are then represented, which is exemplified in the dissatisfied audience member who did not recognise the language. It seems from Glass's comments above that his use of the language does not conceal an attempt to construct a relation of 'difference;' non-recognition or non-reference. The aim seems to emphasise the experience of otherness and its apolitical effects on the predominantly Western listeners (as observed from the majority of the audiences attending *Satyagraha* in London and New York).

Bellman argues that in the case of music exoticism, which could also be said about language exoticism, the suggestion of strangeness is the overriding factor, 'not only does the music *sound* different from "our" music, but it also suggests a specifically alien culture or ethos' (xii). In turn, he continues, 'the very acknowledgement of difference carries within it an implicit comparison and judgment; that is, the idea that "they are different from us" cannot help becoming "they are happier, sadder, more serious, more pleasure-loving, purer, more corrupt"' (xii). This suggests that the implications of exoticism go beyond merely the familiar versus the unfamiliar, and it is these cultural connections and tensions that make such stylistic appropriations appealing, compelling, as well as troubling.

The notion of 'internationalising' a culturally specific language such as Sanskrit claimed by Glass above proves to be problematic for audiences who seek to identify a language that they know. As for the performers who had to learn and memorise the full libretto, the Sanskrit was further from being 'international' as Glass had hoped. The chorus master at the English National Opera, who worked on

Satyagraha in 2007 and 2010, thinks that the libretto is ‘a sound. And the great thing is that what Philip Glass wanted about it was that it was pure sound, so you didn’t get involved in the meaning’ (Merry). This goes with Bellman’s argument that ‘[e]xoticism is not about the earnest study of foreign cultures; it is about drama, effect, and evocation. The listener is intrigued, hears something new and savory, but is not aurally destabilized enough to feel uncomfortable’ (xii-xiii).

Glass collaborated with Indian, and other musicians from non-Western cultures and studied some aspects of the Indian musical forms.[62] He learnt the Sanskrit in transliteration before writing a phonetic translation of the libretto for *Satyagraha*’s singers, which, according to Glass, was checked and corrected by Prabodha, a Sanskrit scholar (DeJong and Glass 40). Thus, he engaged with the study of the musical forms and the languages of the cultures he encountered and borrowed from to a large extent. Nevertheless, the problem of utilising a foreign language for its aesthetic effect, reshaping it to fit within Western musical forms, manifests itself at the moment of direct encounter with its listeners; the audience, as well as its users; the singers. *Satyagraha* became notorious among the singers who performed it for its laboriousness. They saw it as a challenging opera to sing, to the level of being potentially physically harmful for their vocal chords. Many of the singers (most of whom were from Western origin, and none from Indian origin) complained of the difficulty of learning the text in spite of using a simple phonetic system and pronunciation key determined by Glass after learning the language in transliteration (DeJong and Glass 40). One of the lead principal singers who performed in the London productions admits that ‘learning it was really tough, and I had moments when I thought: I’m not going to manage this’ (Oke). Another lead principal singer, performed in the New York production in 2008, also declares that '[o]nce I got past the idea that I had to count 17 beats to a bar, what surprised me was the amount of time it would take me to memorise the Sanskrit.' He found that Sanskrit is 'really just blind repetition' (qtd. in Taylor, 'An Improbable'); repetition that is partly due to the structure of the musical score. Also the chorus members in London, according to the chorus master, felt that they would 'never ever be able to learn this piece; it's so repetitive, it's long, it's great music but we don't know where we are' (Merry). Therefore for the most parts many singers, if not all of them, learned the words without knowing their exact meanings. This was marked by using a 'cuing system' that the chorus master in London invented to get over the difficulty of remembering the words; by projecting the first word of a line that the singers probably knew on two video screens positioned strategically at the back of the auditorium (Merry). The result for some singers, as a reviewer noticed, was that they struggled with the text, and 'their eyes were glued to the TV screens' (Kory).

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[62] See footnote 53 above.

On the other hand, the use of language as a material theatrical element, or as an object divorced from its direct use, had practical and theatrical implications on the staging of the opera. It played part in questioning the authority of the written text within a creative process, and allowed performers to engage with the work in ways that go beyond literal translation of meaning and beyond direct representation of actions. This goes with Jon Erickson's understanding of objectification as a strategy of resisting the absolute instrumentalisation of modern works of art and literature. Or what he terms as a process of 'material objectification,' through which an object draws attention to its own 'objecthood' as a way of resisting rationalised language's tendency to reduce it to a sign to be consumed. This means that the object resists a ‘too-easy’ reception, which maintains the longevity of the work and its resistance to forces of time and fashion (3). This form of structuring the production of works of art, according to Erickson, defies rhetorical appropriation and escapes the reductions of interpretation (138). The objectification of the Sanskrit in the opera, seen from one side as problematic, also serves, from another side, ‘the creation or depiction of an object that cannot be further reduced to the state of a “name”’ (Erickson 4). The opera as a product is the ‘object’ that escapes the reduction of a singular reading, partly through the use of language.

Objectifying a language in this way, challenged spectators’ conventional viewing experience. Michael Church in *The Independent* argues that when the opera was first staged at the English National Opera in 2007, the fact that the libretto was sung in Sanskrit without surtitles was regarded as unhelpful. However, when the production returned to London in 2010, ‘knowing that I would only have the vaguest idea of what was going on, and that - apart from Mr and Mrs Gandhi - I would neither know nor care who was who, I was free to experience the work in a completely different way’ (Church). Anthony Tommasini in reviewing the production at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 2008, comments on how *Satyagraha* ‘invites you to turn off the part of your brain that looks for linear narrative and literal meaning in a musical drama and enter a contemplative state — not hard to do during the most mesmerizing parts of the opera, especially in this sensitive performance’ (Tommasini).

The freedom of interpretation and response experienced by the audience is emphasised by the freedom given to performers in their engagement with their characters and with the stage action during the making process as it was led by

Improbable's artistic directors. The written text was not ignored or dispensed with altogether, but the majority of the opera's action, movement and visual narrative were not prescribed or scripted by it. Performers were given space to find their individual ways of connecting to the work on different levels, unrestricted by the authority of the word. This leads to looking at Improbable's approach to the text. In their creative processes, the company members propose alternative ways of working with the text that stems from their interest in theatre's vibrancy, its liveness, improvisation and that also extends their interest in objects and materials.

3.9. Improbable Texts: The Text as an Object of Play

Improbable members understand the process of theatre making as an embodied activity rather than strictly as a mental one. For them, the body, the voice, the imagination and emotions are all equal partners in the making of performance. Their concern is to give a text-based play the spontaneity and immediacy of an improvised performance. 'In order to make a text sing you have to wrestle with it and play with it with your whole self,' argues McDerrmott ('Physical' 204). Accordingly, the challenge in working with a written text is not in memorising it, but in making it as dynamic as an improvised performance. As a way of tackling the challenging tension between text, physicality and immediacy, McDermott resorted to using actor-director Jeremy Whelan's recording technique mentioned in his book *Instant Acting* (1994), known as the 'Whelan Tape Method.' McDermott used this method in the making of several text-based productions, such as *Theatre of Blood* (2005), a stage adaptation of a 1970s horror film under the same name. In order to avoid imposing pre-decided meanings, the actors in this production were not allowed to memorise their lines or engage with the text or with their characters in conventional methods commonly followed in text-based theatre. Instead, by using the Whelan method, the text was recorded, and as it was played back, the actors engaged with the scene without speaking the lines. In this way, they immediately engaged with their bodies in the space before deciding on how to speak any of the lines. Then the text was re-recorded and the same process repeated, exploring different games and ways of playing to the recording each time, never allowing the actors to perform a scene in the same way twice, to finally play the entire script 'off-book.' To McDermott's surprise, he often finds that actors tend to remember 70-80% of the text without ever having learnt their lines in a common way. Additionally, they immediately explore ways to perform the lines in the theatrical space and in interaction with each other, rather than in isolation. He finds that

> performers immediately engage with the script in the space and they are straightaway forced to dig deep to the sub-text in a non-intellectual way. Without scripts in their hands the performers are liberated to fully explore the physical aspects and emotional impulses within a text. […] All interpretation must be forged from the crucible of ensemble interaction. ('Physical' 206)

McDermott is not undermining the value of the written word, but his is an attempt to find a link with the openness of improvisation. It is meant to be a 'body-based' way of working that supports actors' creativity and courage, encouraging them to believe in their own impulses and intuition (McDermott, 'Instant Acting;' 'Dreaming'). This method is meant to empower actors as authors of the performance text, including them as part of the making of the theatrical experience, not only as interpreters of a text already written. The urge to approach the text in a physical-led process is demonstrated in another case. When co-directing Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1996) with the English Shakespeare Company, McDermott and Crouch asked the actors to begin improvising their physical performance before incorporating the text into their bodies (Svich 48). A text and a set design element were somewhat fixed in that production, but they still encouraged the actors to play the text in any way they wanted, so they played it differently every night (McDermott, 'Dreaming').

McDermott thinks that in conventional text-led work, the authority of the written text often disempowers actors; hindering rather than enabling the choices their bodies have. By using the method of recording, or other methods of improvising with the text, the intention is 'to make a play that has the vibrancy and immediacy of an improvised show whilst really doing justice to the script we have created' (McDermott, 'Instant Acting'). It helps maintain the liveness of improvisation as the essence of the work that keeps the performers and the audience in the 'unknown' so that they stay engaged. It is another way of using the script as a material to improvise, play and explore with in an open dialogue during rehearsals. It becomes a fundamentally physical process, rather than strictly textual. As Heddon and Milling argue in discussing the work of Theatre de Complicite, the body in such modes of making

> becomes a repository of narrative, not through the compressed naturalistic embodiment of a character's internal narrative summoned by 'emotional memory' and 'motivation', but through the fluidity of role from character, to stage-hand, to narrator, to object, each movement crystallising a distinct and disjunctive moment in the time, and thus the narrative, of the story. (182)

It is possible to see, in this light, how *Satyagraha* presented an opportunity for the company to exercise a sense of liberation from the authority of a script for both performers and audiences. The makers even identified a parallel link between the sense of openness integral to their staging and the practice of Satyagraha philosophy. McDermott invites the spectator to approach the opera 'with the same openness, a sense of surrender to the musical form that Philip Glass has written, as you would to *satyagraha*; that might involve meditation, where you examine yourself and become aware of your own impulses and rise above them' (McDermott and Crouch, 'Discussing'). The next section explores the company's approach towards the creation of some of the images and visual narratives during the making of the opera in ways that preserved the openness they aspired to maintain throughout the production and that they saw as integral to their understanding of the Satyagraha paradigm. I will draw on two examples from the rehearsal processes to show how this was practically applied in the makers' physical approach to directing the action and movement forms.

3.10. Alchemizing Action: Non-Textual Creation in the Making of *Satyagraha*

In directing the movement and the actions at the beginning of *Satyagraha*'s rehearsal process, performers were not necessarily asked to represent particular events or characters in detail or by mobilising internal, psychological dynamics. The directors' emphasis during rehearsals was on the awareness of what occurs between performers, between performers and audiences, and on the invisible space in between them, setting up some conditions within which they can experience and enhance those senses. The majority of the work was about visualisation, imagination, presence and 'seeing' the self in space and in relation to other performers. To achieve this, the company created a frame of working informed by the work of a combination of practitioners from the theatre and beyond.[63]

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[63] Some of the practitioners that continue to influence Improbable's work in various ways, with their impact manifesting itself in *Satyagraha* both implicitly and explicitly, include Arnold Mindell's work on conflict resolution, as well as his process oriented psychology work and open forums; Moshe Feldenkrais's ideas on awareness of the body and of habitual patterns; Philip Gaulier's work on clowning; and Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone's teachings of improvisation. McDermott 'invented'

One of the most significant of influences, particularly for McDermott, has been Michael Chekhov's approach to acting. Chekhov's interest in imagination and incorporation of images over naturalistic detail found resonance in Improbable's way of working in relation to the written text. In his teachings for actors, Chekhov stresses that going beyond text and author is important to liberate creative individuality. He established a system of training based on the body, intuition, imagination and the ability to improvise within set limits, instead of focusing on analytic approaches to character. The system's main components are: imagination and concentration, higher ego, atmospheres and qualities, centres, imaginary bodies, radiance and style (Chamberlain 84). These are seen as ways of aiding a performer's engagement with a character without falling back on predetermined conceptions or habitual emotional responses.

Chekhov proposed a number of exercises useful for highlighting these qualities and for increasing the body's flexibility and responsiveness, and Improbable members recurrently use versions of them in their devising, including in *Satyagraha*. Particularly the ideas of 'atmospheres' and 'qualities' as Chekhov developed in theory and practice are major elements in his technique that has a great impact on Improbable's work.[64] They are considered as objective ways of engaging with a character and evoking responses without relying on prescribed parameters. Sensitivity to atmospheres and qualities, and the ability to create them onstage is a key skill for the actor for Chekhov that connects between actors, and between actors

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his own way of using those practices, sometimes in different combinations (McDermott, 'Physical Theatre;' 'Influences').

[64] An atmosphere can be considered as 'the dominant tone or mood of, amongst other things, a place, a relationship, or an artwork,' and each different atmosphere will have a different effect on individuals in contact with them (Chamberlain 87). According to Chekhov, 'the atmosphere has its predominant will (dynamics) and feeling and, according to these elements, the atmosphere can be easily realized by means of their inherent gesture and quality' (Chekhov, '*To The Actor*' 174-75).

and audiences (Chamberlain 87). Getting a feeling of a scene's atmosphere helps it 'radiate into the audience through any blocking suggested to you by the director and any lines given to you by the author. It will unite you with both your partners and the audience; it will inspire your acting and free you from clichés and bad stage habits' (Chekhov, '*To The Actor*' 177). As for qualities, Chekhov proposes them as a way of 'coaxing up' feelings that cannot be forced or commanded. Qualities are an immediate and accessible way to revive the actor's emotions by relying primarily on imagination, incorporation of images and bodily responses. As he puts it,

> You can immediately move your arms and hands with the *Quality* of tenderness, joy, anger, suspicion, sadness, impatience, etc., even though you do not experience the Feeling of tenderness, joy or anger. After moving with one of these qualities, sooner or later you will observe that you are experiencing the *Sensation* of tenderness, and very soon this Sensation will call up a true emotion of *Feeling* of tenderness within you. (*On the Technique* x1-x1i)

If the action is 'what,' the quality is 'how' (Chekhov, *On the Technique* 38). Chekhov proposed a series of 'physical-psychological' exercises that aim at increasing the body's sensitivity and its ability to receive an actor's inner impulses and to convey them expressively to the audience. Those include exercises for the psychological qualities of moulding, flowing, flying and radiating (Chekhov, *On the Technique* 43-47).[65] Those main four qualities are at the heart of most of the company's improvising and are employed to evoke movement forms, characterisation as well as in working with objects.

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[65] Chekhov explains that in the exercises he proposes, 'moulding' movement suggests moving in space as if through a thick, heavy substance. Muscular tension is not necessary to perform this exercise. The meaning lies in the psychological power of 'moulding,' of overcoming imaginary resistance (Chekhov, *On the Technique* 45). In 'flowing' movement, 'every movement is slurred into another in an unbroken line' (Chekhov, *On the Technique* 45). The air around the body in this case constitutes a supporting force for the movement. In 'flying' movement, it is imagined that the body has the tendency to lift itself from the ground. One movement is linked to the next continuously and freely, although not so 'slurred' as in the 'flowing' movement. The element of air in this exercise must be experienced as one that stirs and urges. As for 'radiating' movement, invisible rays imaginatively stream from the body and the movement into space, in the direction of the movement itself. These rays are sent out from the chest, arms and hands, then from the whole body at once. All of Chekhov's movement qualities exercises start with performing simple movements, then the movements or gestures are heightened until the character of each quality is lived inwardly and embodied. The heightened movements are then returned to the level of normal actions while

The company commonly practices Chekhov's exercises at various stages during rehearsals, using objects at some points. They provide immediate and embodied support for performers to help them get into their roles, their characters, the ensemble or the moment of improvisation; 'whenever you are playing a scene know what the quality is that you are taking in. Know that you're going in to the scene moulding and then find out who you are' (McDermott, 'Movement Qualities'). Crouch suggests that the value of the movement qualities lies in the fact that even when we cannot see what we are creating, the movement qualities help the image and make it interesting (New York Rehearsals Notes). The directors of *Satyagraha* proposed the movement qualities as a guiding principle for the action and movement in each scene, introducing them at the start of the devising process. Performers' sense of space, how they walked on stage, how they gestured, sang, interacted with each other and with objects, and how they performed certain tasks, were all conditioned by movement qualities and atmospheres as their initial impulse. In addition to the main four qualities, McDermott proposed additional ones in the rehearsals that specifically responded to the subject of the opera. For example, the actions in Act II, Scene 2 ('*Indian Opinion*'), which involved the Ensemble interacting with sheets of newspaper to indicate a process of producing and distributing the publication, were conditioned by qualities such as, 'clarity,' 'efficiency,' 'nobility,' 'pride,' 'wisdom,' 'wonder,' 'strength,' 'determination,' and so on (London Rehearsals Notes, 2010). Engaging with these qualities while

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maintaining the character and the attitude evoked by the quality. Simple improvisations are then created while experimenting with the different qualities (Chekhov, *On the Technique* 45-47).

practicing the scene, in whatever way each performer interpreted them, gave it further depth and resonance. The following examples show how these qualities and principles of creation were applied during rehearsals.

3.10.1. Example #1: Directing the Chorus's Action

As a demonstration of how a scene would be devised without giving scripted instructions, the following are examples of directing certain moments in the opera from the early days of rehearsals in London (2007) and in New York (2008). Working with the chorus members on Act I, Scene 3 ('The Vow'), co-director McDermott started by discussing the historical background of the scene and the implications of taking the vow as a key moment in the birth of Satyagraha movement. He then presented the general idea behind the image and the action occurring in that scene. He explained that it would entail a 'costume story,' where the chorus members and principal singers (Gandhi and his followers) take off their outer garments (coats, jackets, shawls, etc.) and put them on clothes hangers suspended above stage level. Those hangers would then be lifted to raise the disembodied garments above the performers and the actions, projecting light on them, which enhances their colours. The scene signifies a moment of change taking place; a gesture of 'de-robing' that replaces the Western clothes with Indian-made garments as a political statement.

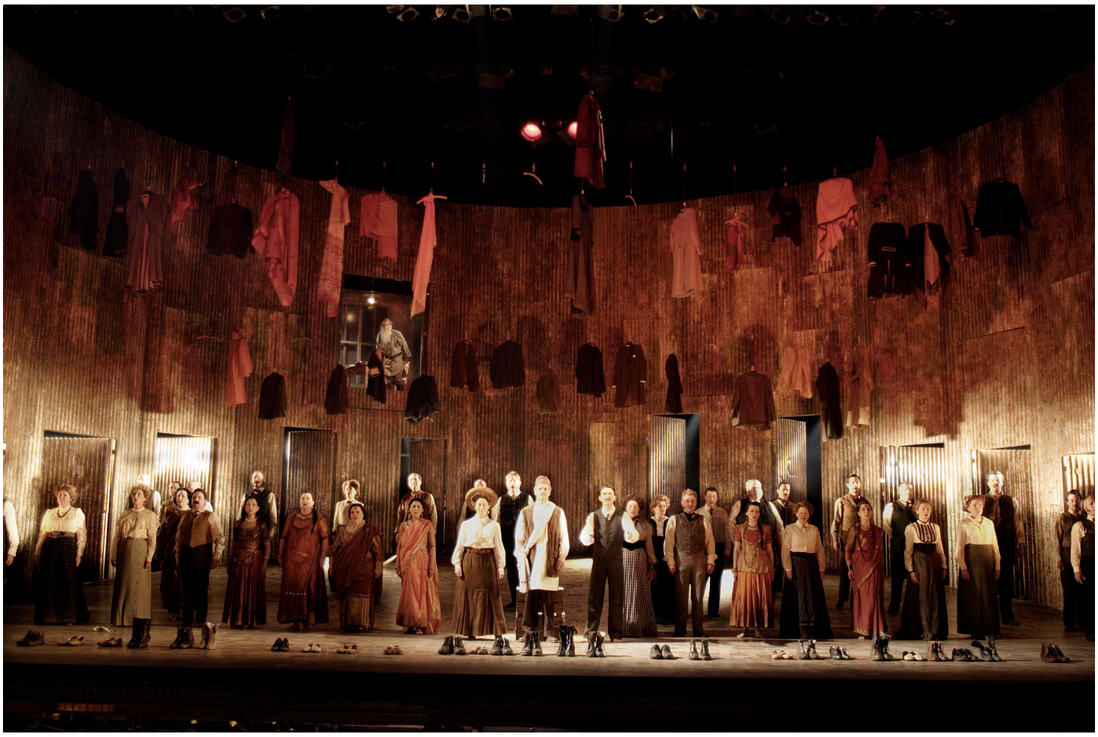

Fig. 41. Act I, Scene 3. ENO, London (2007). Photo by Catherine Ashmore

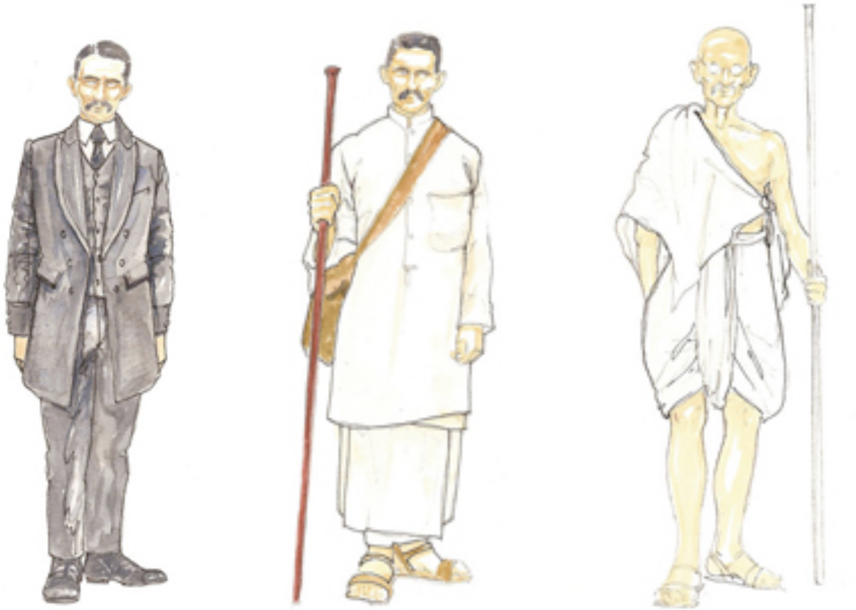

Fig. 42. The gradual transformation in Gandhi's clothes in the opera. Costume design and illustration by Kevin Pollard

The chorus members were then asked to ‘walk through’ that scene, enacting some of the gestures of taking clothes off and putting them on the hangers with an awareness of their movement qualities and their actions in relation to others. For instance, when the chorus members gradually enter the stage through open doors in the set, McDermott suggested that they move with a quality of ‘significance’ in whatever way they may interpret that term, rather than giving specific instructions for their movement (London Rehearsals Notes, 2007). The quality aimed to support the performers in finding a point of access to their roles, engaging their spatial and bodily awareness. This lack of reliance on the text in conditioning the stage action is evident in McDermott’s preference of not using prompts during the rehearsals to allow more freedom for performers in what they do (New York Rehearsal Notes).

3.10.2. Example #2: Directing the Ensemble and the Generation of Meanings

In another example at the beginning of the rehearsals of the New York production in 2008, McDermott introduced group exercises for all of the cast members, sometimes including members of the production team as a way of enhancing a sense of connection between people, which in part, is what Satyagraha movement signifies to the makers. The exercises also aim at shifting the performers’ focus away from consciously analysing and thinking of the details of the scene, into an immediate and embodied engagement with the atmosphere, developing a physical approach to their roles. The exercises draw on a combination of sources, including Chekhov and Viola Spolin’s actor training techniques (New York Rehearsals Notes). One of the exercises starts with walking in the space of the rehearsal room, noticing others and connecting to them on a non-physical level, while being aware of the space between them. If a person is walking in one of the four qualities, she/he is encouraged to see others through that quality. The emphasis is always on the space between performers rather than on individual actions. The next progression of that exercise is to have a dialogue with the self while performing the above actions, speaking out whatever is seen. For example: ‘I can see a black top, I can see Rob smiling, I can see pipes on the wall,’ and so on. Next, is to try and notice feelings or sensations: ‘I can see Rob, and I feel pleased; I can see pipes on the wall and I feel curious, etc.’ Then is to try and think outside of the self: ‘I can see Rob, I wonder how he feels today; I can see pipes on the wall, I wonder how they are mounted,’ for example, and then to have that dialogue internally without speaking it out (New York Rehearsals Notes). The exercise helps to heighten sensitivity, increases self-awareness and affects group and interpersonal communication, particularly non-verbal communication. As a participant in that exercise, my awareness of my own emotions while they were occurring, towards myself and towards others, was heightened. Especially engaging with the question ‘I wonder’ made a significant transformation in the group dynamic. It evoked a sense of openness towards others and towards the outside environment that noticeably bound participants together, generating an overall atmosphere shared between performers. The following shows how this can have a transformational effect on a scene when applied on a specific moment from the performance. It demonstrates how the emotional effects of a certain action can resonate by responding to the improvisation structure described above, not by recalling those emotional responses.

The end of Act II, Scene 2 (‘*Indian Opinion*’) involves dynamic, rhythmical music and action. A huge pile of newspaper sheets is frantically rolled, mixed and torn apart, with a quality of ‘flying,’ by the Ensemble centre stage, at the same time, hundreds of sheets of newspaper fall from above. This is followed by Act II, Scene 3

(‘Protest’) in which the beginning is marked by a shift in music and action. Both calm down and the paper sheets settle on the ground. The Ensemble performers reenter the stage, this time with different movement qualities (moulding, floating, radiating, or a combination of them), and gradually clear the stage by carefully picking up and gathering the scattered paper into baskets with a sense of dedication.

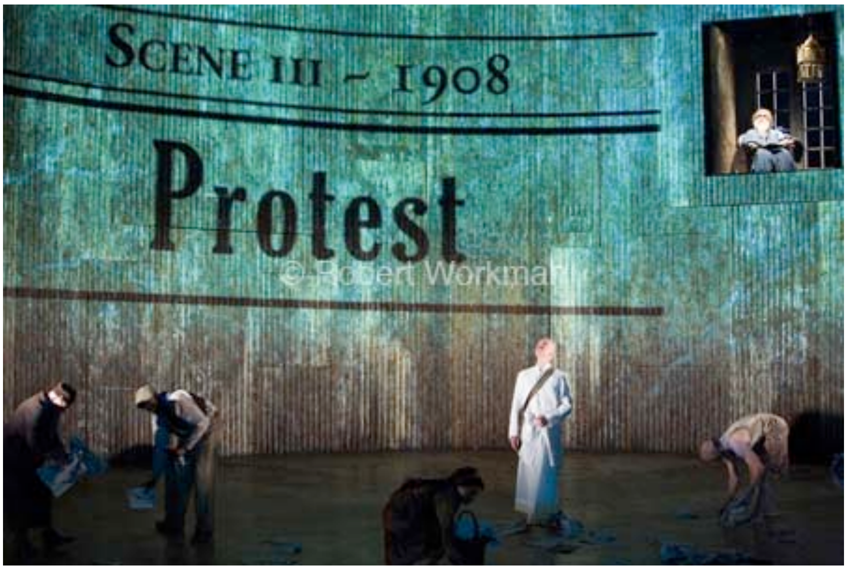

Fig. 43. The beginning of Act II, Scene 3. ENO, London (2007). Photo by Robert Workman

While rehearsing that moment in 2008, McDermott encouraged performers, including myself, to engage with the question ‘I wonder’ as explored in the previous exercise while performing the quotidian task of picking up paper sheets. An outside observer commented in that instance on the immediate and noticeable shift in the quality and the atmosphere of the action, and the increased sense of connection that occurred as soon as performers followed McDermott’s suggestion. It endowed the performance in that moment with a profound sense of purpose, commitment and thoughtfulness towards the humble task at hand (New York Rehearsals Notes).

Crouch argues that the action of clearing the newspaper sheets by a group of people became one of the most extraordinary images in the opera for him, especially with the figure of Gandhi present in the scene overseeing the action and sometimes taking part in clearing the paper, 'it ended up so loaded with meaning, which is beautiful and accidental' (Interview).[66] It is a moment where the figure of Gandhi is also objectified. His presence observing the action, with the Ensemble performers conscientiously collecting the paper scattered around him, emphasise a hierarchical relationship. Gandhi's status as an object of devotion, and the Skills Ensemble's lower status as 'untouchables' become momentarily underlined. Following from the highly dynamic action and music, and preceding what signifies Gandhi's call for protest, the image of quietly collecting the paper by the group emerged as a moment of calm after chaos, where people get together to collect the pieces, almost in a ritualistic sense of devotion, contemplating action with a sense of vulnerability as well as clarity.[67] Embedded meanings and values and a feeling of significance became externalised in that seemingly mundane action. The atmosphere evoked by simply engaging with the question 'I wonder' during the rehearsals, in addition to the awareness of movement qualities, enabled meanings to go beyond the action and to be visually communicated to the audience. It also linked the action to the wider implications of the opera's subject matter without imposing direct references, thereby questioning the authority of the idea of simple description, and instead, grounded the descriptions in visual structures.

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[66] As I have demonstrated, the effect of that moment in the scene may not be entirely accidental. It initially emerged as a response to a technical problem, which is how to clear the stage that became almost covered with sheets of newspaper. The idea was for this to be done by the Ensemble as part of the scene, which then became loaded with significance because of a combination of factors, including the movement qualities, the shift in music, the atmosphere, the implications of that moment in relation to Gandhi and his political movement, the connection between performers and of course the audience perception. But it was not choreographed in advance either, so in that sense its effects came as a surprise to the makers.

[67] McDermott compares this to a moment of a 'post-disaster,' as in after an earthquake or a flood (London Rehearsals Notes, 2010).

The physical exercises in the rehearsals fed directly into the creation of images in ways that resisted simple mimetic relationships and generated narratives without imposing a particular form of choreography or direct emotional responses. An exercise in those cases is not a prelude to theatre making; it is already theatre in the making. It is an invitation to discover what is happening in a scene through the body and the senses. The literal interpretation of the libretto extracted from the *Bhagavad-Gita* was respected. It was referred to during rehearsals as a general basis for the action, but it was not emphasised as a justification for actions. Even Glass's stage directions for each scene were not followed accurately. The music was seen as an 'atmosphere' rather than a conventional narrative (McDermott and Crouch, London Rehearsals Notes, 2007). The musical score and the libretto's text became catalysts rather than prescriptions. The idea of 'people coming together' ran through the process as a guiding principle, and was indirectly served by the exercises and improvisations between performers. The process as a whole appeared as an analogy to Satyagraha's philosophy and how it advocates change through people working together 'from a place of truth and from their soul and a commitment to doing something that really connects to themselves, but as a group' (McDermott, 'Video Interview'). Thus Gandhi's journey of change and achievements towards establishing the Satyagraha paradigm underlined the process and the stage action.

Responses to some aspects of the staging reflect the influence of the company's way of working with performers and the emphasis on movement qualities and atmospheres rather than the word. Justin Davidson claims that '[t]he production unfurls at its own pace, not so much interpreting the music as co-existing with it' (Davidson). Another reviewer notes that the movement 'is slow, meditative, without guidance. One *feels* rather than sees the movement' (Rolnick). Anne Midgette thought that '[i]t is perhaps an extra challenge for the singers that they are given little conventional sense of character to work with.' Additionally, '[t]he beauty of the Improbable production […] is that its imagery is so greatly bound up with the music. The chorus comes together to form larger entities—monsters, animals, surfaces for slide projections—then drifts apart, like Glass's notes' (Midgette). Spectators could identify an artistic integrity in the staging and a dialogical relationship between spectacle and musical score. The effects of shifting the emphasis away from the word or literal interpretation; the opera's openness, lack of authoritative stance and its non-hierarchical placement of dramatic elements, are clearly exemplified in Stephen Graham's comment on the latest staging of 2010 in London:

> Emphatically not a biography […], or even a depiction in any real sense of Gandhi the living and breathing man, the work seeks a cryptic poetry that evokes in profile the elusiveness and transcendence of the concept at the heart of Gandhi's philosophy. The superlunary ideals of Satyagraha are projected onto their author, such that the Gandhi we view is neither man nor messiah, but idea. The answering of any drama or conflict within the piece with stasis and equanimity levels the consciousness to the point of hardness, a hardness that is apparently external to moral inquiry (which we know not to be an accurate portrayal of Gandhi nor the movement he inspired). But such is the way of this opera, a work developed in a form which cannot provide a moral disquisition after all, but can merely poetically explore some of the ideals of a philosophy, in this case Gandhi's philosophy. (Graham)

Glass's intention of shifting the weight of meaning from the text and onto the images, the music and the stage actions, negotiating the 'material objectivity' of a language by creating a parallel relation between text and action, provided a way of meditating on an idea rather than representing it. As Erickson remarks on Eugen

Gomringer's 'concrete poetry,' '[i]f meaning wasn't being transmitted referentially, it was communicating analogically, using metaphors grounded in the visual (proxemic) structure rather than the grammatical' (153). This is similarly seen in the connection between text and imagery in *Satyagraha*, particularly with the dynamic stage spectacle realised by Improbable and that evoked its own journey of narrative construction.

3.11. Conclusion

This chapter looked at the work of Improbable theatre company as a model of a productive dynamic between the human performer and physical objects. Some of the factors that distinguish the work of the company are the methods they adopt in approaching everyday utilitarian objects during a creative process and on the stage. The chapter focused on the company's ability to acknowledge, and practically accommodate the material characteristics intrinsic in objects as activators of a making process, which plays part in enhancing performance, and enriching the audience's experience. This responds to the key point that is raised in the first chapter of this thesis regarding the 'agency' of objects and the value engrained in engaging with their inherent materiality. This chapter used some of the research findings of the creative process of Improbable's *Satyagraha* to aid in illustrating the proposed issues and the performing dynamics addressed. The making of the opera provided a case study through which many of the key concepts proposed by the company were explored through observation, participation and analysis.

Improbable's work processes tend to be multilayered, dynamic and non-linear, so were the discussions in this chapter. They traced the journey of the making, not by necessarily following a chronological or a progressive order of actions, but by highlighting key moments in the creative process that serve the main areas of concern raised in this thesis. They showed that the company's visual vocabulary, although kept open and flexible, is informed by their established modes of practice that are engrained in the artists' consciousness. The company's keen investment in the transformational capacities of the humble objects they recurrently use and reuse allows their established modes and their signature materials to attain a new life each time they are revisited. The company's creative decisions and materials are rarely new or 'original,' but they are pushed beyond their familiar or functional limitations, thus they are seen in new light, creating ingenious theatrical spectacles. It is what they referred to during the making of *Satyagraha* as 'alchemizing' humble materials such as the newspaper, underlining the infinite possibilities of change and transformation engrained in their forms and functions.

The chapter demonstrated that this approach to the use of objects and materials is built upon from the first moment of devising a piece. The object's presence is central to that process, occupying a vital and a respected position alongside the performer. In addition to initiating a process, the object takes part in establishing the fundamental work principles among performers, and between performers and objects. It plays part in setting up a work ethos based on respect, humility, openness and dialogue, which are essential for performance practice. Improbable members take this impulse seriously, to the extent of looking at the relationship between a performer and an object as a model of a relationship between a performer and an-other that eventually influences the audiences' reception. My experience as a participant in the work process of *Satyagraha* shed light on this philosophy of working 'with' objects, showing its effectiveness in devising and performing situations, as well as its usefulness as a performance training initiative. The making process is emphasised as a social phenomenon, where the subject-object dynamic is parallel to a 'subject-subject' dynamic. A relationship to an object is seen as an externalisation of a relationship to an 'other,' and the object itself becomes creative of social relations, which is an analogy useful for understanding and enhancing performance practice.

The attitude towards objects is extended in the company's approach towards the written text, seen as a material open for negotiation and transformation. Their main concern is to preserve the vibrancy of a performance as a live event, which is often lost in text-based work that tends to restrict the actors' authorship and creative potentials by giving primacy to the written word. To achieve this, the company's practices show alternative ways of negotiating the text without dispensing with it altogether. In *Satyagraha*, the makers from Improbable were given an opportunity to practice their interest in openness of interpretation and in destabilising the authority of the word through engaging with an operatic score that is itself flexible and nonrepresentational. The narrative and the action on stage emerged to a large part by activating the performers' physical responses, rather than by focusing on interpreting, or representing a certain text. Therefore, the chapter acknowledges two important sides of the objectification of language in *Satyagraha*: the exoticism implied in the use of a specific language in composing the sung libretto, and also the theatricality of the medium that is potentially enabling and empowering for both performers and audiences.

The work of Improbable, exemplified in the staging of *Satyagraha*, is an invitation to reconsider the relationship between subject and object and its wider implications in performance practice and reception. Unlike the radicalisation of this relationship in modernist art and its paradigms, where the subject-object hierarchy is reversed to its extreme, the performer for Improbable is not dehumanised, neither is the physical object 'humanised.' They occupy a position of a sensitive negotiation between two different entities, where each takes part in emphasising the creative forces of the other, without hindering the contribution or the embodied values of the other. 'Respect,' humility and inclusiveness are important principles for the makers that affect all manifestations of life, including humans and things, and they play part in mobilising aspects of performance making beyond the limitation of rationalisation. Integral to this philosophy of making is an intrinsic rebellion against hierarchy and against tyrannical claims of authority; whether it is the authority of the subject, the author, or the word, practically giving voice to the voiceless and destabilising accepted norms. However, collaborating with the English National Opera and the Metropolitan Opera in *Satyagraha* compelled working within a hierarchical structure and a division of responsibilities, which highlighted the directors' status as the leaders of the overall process of making (apart from conducting the music). Nevertheless, a lot of space was given to others to contribute and to have their say in a diversity of ways.

As I have observed and experienced, the object in Improbable's work regains a sense of authorship often lost in processes of representation and interpretation. It attains and gives birth to 'life,' in acts of creation shared between performers and objects. By acknowledging this principle in the journey of *Satyagraha*; by 'playing' with a few household materials and everyday objects, an impressive spectacle was created surprising even its creators with the popularity and success of the production.

Laura Battle argues, ‘English National Opera’s production of Glass’ *Satyagraha* in 2007 smashed box-office records for a contemporary opera and proved a critical and commercial success, attracting first-time opera-goers as much as anyone else’ (Battle).[68] However, this did not prevent some audience members who did not tolerate the over-length, the repetitiveness of music or the incomprehensibility of libretto from walking out of the theatre mid-performance. It is a demanding theatrical experience that sees enjoyment and spectatorship as actions taking place within the warmth and comfort of the luxurious auditorium. At the same time, it demands a readiness to surrender to its openness and lack of ready answers, trusting that meanings will reveal themselves. This demand for dedication and the faith in dualities is expressed in Gandhi’s lines in *Satyagraha*, taken from the *Bhagavad-Gita*: ‘wise men know that [theory and practice] can be gained in applying oneself whole heartedly to one’ (DeJong and Glass 50).

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[68] *Satyagraha* was invited to return to the English National Opera for a revival in 2010 after its first success there in 2007 and at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 2008. It is going to be revived again at the Metropolitan Opera in 2011.

Chapter Four

Seeing through the Wall: Objectification and Resistance in Yael Davids's Performance Installations

4.1. Introduction

This chapter looks at the notion of objectification in relation to the human body when it is placed at the centre of a work of art. I will specifically look at a case study where the impulse to present the human body as the object of art is negotiated as a politically charged vehicle of expression framed within a performed practice of domination and resistance. In this instance, the body's presence becomes a moment of transformation, as I will explain below. The body emerges from the material exchange between internal and external forces as an instrument of agency, embodying a genealogy of opposing forces. In other words, objectification in that instance paradoxically transforms the body into an active agent that turns its objectification against itself in a search for mechanisms of resistance. In exploring this issue, I will look at a performance installation created within a politically conditioned framework and underlined by a long-standing historical conflict that is embedded in the consciousness of the creator of the work: the Palestine-Israel conflict. The examined work offers a practical and physical response to the questions that are at the heart of this thesis, namely the shifting of agency and the subject-object hierarchy.

The discussions in Chapter One reveal that rethinking conventional assumptions about the subject-object relationship has been pronounced in contemporary performance practice and theorising. Gay McAuley asserts that,

> The distinction between object and nonobject is thus fluid and unstable, and in much modern theatre and performance the goal is less to tell a story or present a character than to explore the shifting boundaries between decor and object, body and object, costume and object, and this in itself tells us a good deal about contemporary human experience. (176)

Indeed, modern and contemporary performance practices have found much fertile ground and creative stimuli in negotiating the relationship between human performers and physical material by attempting to underline, blur, shift or subvert it. Challenging the common distinction and the accepted separation between the two entities has been utilised in performance as a way of expressing human subjective experiences. Issues of sexuality, gender, culture, politics and identity have been examined through questioning the body's corporeal status in relation to objects. These contemporary practices have been primarily concerned with challenging the dominant modes of Western thinking that tend to see the human subject in terms of opposites: mind and body; psychology and biology; reason and passion; outside and inside; self and other, which denies a fundamental interaction between the two. Often adopting a phenomenological attitude, those practices re-examined the relationship between interiority and exteriority, starting with the belief that the body is neither an object, nor is it a subject separated from the world; but it is both object and lived consciousness.

Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz asserts that, the body 'is never simply object nor simply subject. It is defined by its relations with objects and in turn defines these objects as such. [...] It is through the body that the world of objects appears to me; it is in virtue of having/being a body that there are objects for me' (87). The connection between the body and objects suggested in Grosz's quotation has been the starting point and the main premise of the work of artists who attempt to dissolve the traditional subject-object split, recognising the dialectical and lived relation between the self, the body and the material world surrounding them. The presence of the object in this case conditions processes of creation and reception, influencing the position of the human body at their centre. The object becomes a means to destabilise the boundary of the animate and the inanimate, and to reconsider the presence of the body in time and space.

This led to a reconfiguration of the body and its psychical and corporeal boundaries in performance, pushing the limitations of how it is commonly perceived. This impulse gave birth to a generation of artists who tried to re-examine the body's physical coherence and the connectedness between the body, the self and the outside. In their work, they tried to pose questions on the social and political statuses of the body by presenting it as a site of ambiguities, often in an objectified, vulnerable and abject form. In order to set the conditions for these explorations, the artists replaced the material art object with a temporal act that involves the live human body. This urge marks the twentieth-century performance art movement where artists broke away from pictorial representations of human subjects, and presented the live body as the work of art. In works such as that by Adrian Piper, Marina Abramović and Carolee Schneemann, the human body, its actions, interactions and residues, became not just the subject but also the material object of art. Much of this kind of performance work exposed and enacted the instability of the self, questioning the status of the human subject through a play of relations between inside and outside; presence and absence; passive and active. The body was presented as a site of contestation between two opposing dynamics, which infused it with political and ideological powers. In those instances, objectification becomes charged with conflicts and paradoxical realities, used by artists as their instrument of presentation.

Body artists of the 1970s, especially women artists, used performance as a tool to explore questions of subjectivity and embodiment that had been ignored by Western thought with its predominantly Cartesian propensities. They turned to the object as a mirror to the self and to sense of being, and as a way of connecting them to the external world. This led to attempts in self-objectification, which was seen as a way of re-evaluating the relationship to the 'other.' Performance artists enacted a dual role as both artists and art works, which allowed the process of artistic representation to be internalised in them. The artists consciously made a spectacle of themselves in order to call attention to the spectacle as a process and as a cultural construction. Artist Adrian Piper, for example, created a series of performances where she confronted spectators with her presence, which was often unpredictable, disrupting the familiarity of everyday life. Piper created new dynamics between performer and viewer in a series of performances called *Catalysis* (I to VII) performed in 1970 in public settings. In these works, the artist carried out normal everyday activities but with strange or grotesque alterations to her appearance, looking at the various reactions it provoked in spectators. In her work, Piper investigated the relation between 'myself as solipsistic object inhering in the reflective consciousness of an external audience or subject; and my own self-consciousness of me as an object, as the object of my self-consciousness' (qtd. in Wark 46). Taking the idea of confronting the audience further, Marina Abramović created a piece where she allowed spectators to intervene with her passive body throughout six hours, using any of seventy-two objects placed on a table in *Rhythm 0*

(1974). As the time went on, audience's interactions gradually turned from cautiousness to violence, sometimes using sharp or dangerous objects, while she preserved her passive stance. In a similar manner, Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1965) put her in a position parallel to that of Abramović's when she invited audiences to cut off her clothing with scissors while she remained silently passive, allowing her outfit to gradually disintegrate off her body. Audience's actions around her vulnerable body also varied from the timid to the aggressive, raising questions on the nature of performance art, the ethics of intervention and the responsibility of performance and spectatorship.

Being both the subject and the object of art enabled artists as Piper, Abramović and Ono to provoke immediate, visceral and undetermined responses, therefore marking an important shift away from the aesthetic privileging of the mind over the body and of the intellectual over the corporeal inherent in experiences of art making and reception. Viewers were invited to engage in direct interaction with the artists' subjectivity through the artists' objectified self, by this the work addressed the preoccupation with the external and the internal dialectic in a creative process. Women performance artists in particular took advantage of this attribute intrinsic to performance art as a medium, and negotiated it to articulate their ongoing concerns about issues of female identity within systems of artistic creation and consumption that are dominated by patriarchy.

Adrian Heathfield argues,

> The physical entry of the artist's body into the artwork is a transgressive gesture that confuses the distinctions between subject and object, life and art: a move that challenges the properties that rest on such divisions. Performance explores the paradoxical status of the body as art: treating it as an object within a field of material relations

> with other objects, and simultaneously questioning its objectification by deploying it as a disruption of and resistance to stasis and fixity. (11)

The case study examined in this chapter engages with those concerns, particularly with the implications of placing the live body in a direct, and at times, violent, confrontation with a physical object, which causes a continuous shift of status between the subject and the object. The chapter examines the connotations evoked by that interplay, and how it takes part in articulating wider political issues and in challenging conventional systems of representation and consumption. It starts with introducing the subject of the case study and placing her work within its cultural and political contexts. It is then divided into two sections; the first looks back at the artist's earlier works, which provides a wider understanding of some of their underlying mechanisms, such as the politics of representation that are tied to the presence of the female body at the centre of a work of art. The second section looks at one of her recent performance installations where the shifting boundary between subject and object is invested with political connotations.[69] Finally, the chapter looks at the ethics of performance, an issue raised by Davids's employment of the live bodies of others as the objects of her work, which entails subjecting them to a degree of physical strain. The chapter does not aim to resolve this final question, or to conclude with a judgement of the artist's practice, but it exposes the ambiguity of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics and how it is constantly, and usefully, re-evaluated in performance.

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[69] It is important for reading the examined works to acknowledge their relevance to the wider political context and to the artist's socio-political background. However, I do not delve in too much depth into issues of politics because it would divert from the chapter's main argument and from the thesis's overall concern. Looking at the political context of the work opened up important avenues for future writing beyond this thesis.

In analysing the work of the artist under study, I aim to assess its capacity to achieve the separation between the body and subjectivity as intended by the artist, questioning the limitations of such claim. The notion of objectification is examined, partly by placing myself inside one of the artist's latest pieces. I will argue that in spite of being an object of art, momentarily destabilising my sense of self, my 'self' cannot be denied or absented, but it employs strategies of resistance that work against oppressive objectification. Touching on Hegel's dialectic of negativity, I will draw on the tension between two opposing forces that is demonstrated in the work on two related levels of political objectification and resistance; one is associated with the body's presence in the work; the other is associated with the work's wider political context.

I will employ the notions of visibility and invisibility as they are negotiated in Peggy Phelan's critique of the ideology of representational visibility in contemporary culture in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993). In this seminal text, Phelan directs her critique at the politics of visibility; a politics which seeks empowerment through visibility and exposure. 'Visibility is a trap,' she asserts, 'it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession' (*Unmarked* 6). Phelan argues against economies of vision, instead, she proposes a possibility of being or becoming 'unmarked,' which she sees as an '*active* vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility' (*Unmarked* 19). She discusses the need to move from matters of visibility to invisibility; to disappearance or de-materialisation. As she puts it, '[t]here is real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal' (*Unmarked* 6). She argues that representational visibility is no guarantee of power; rather it should be questioned to see what kind of power is involved and what its implications are. Thus she delineates in her book the contours of the invisible, or the process of disappearance. This notion of invisibility is useful for my assessment of the visible representation of the body in the case study in this chapter and how its value lies in the ‘unseen’ within it. The bodies are visible and present, but at the same time, they negotiate the economy of the invisible and the absent, which pushes them beyond the limitations of conventional representation.

It is important to note that the analysis of the work under exploration does not address direct audiences’ responses as in the other case studies in this thesis. This is partly due to the lack of their documentation, whether in critics’ reviews or in the artist’s personal accounts. Tracing the spectators’ reception of the piece in which I have taken part was particularly challenging since my position was that of a participant rather than an outside observer throughout the whole duration of the work. The available reviews of the group exhibition in which this piece was displayed focus on the exhibition as a whole, but not on the explored installation. Additionally, it was performed three times only and for a limited number of hours, therefore, viewing it was missed by many spectators. However, this specific point is acknowledged as one of the limitations of this study, and one of the methodological challenges that I have encountered during the course of this research. This is compensated by rigorously contextualising the work from my ‘inside’ position, using the available material for me as a participant, and engaging with the implications of placing my body as an object of art in ways that serve the main argument of this chapter and of the thesis as a whole. This is particularly important, especially that a significant part of the piece and its analysis lie in the experience of human beings placed within it.

4.2. The Artist

The focus of this chapter is on Yael Davids, a contemporary woman artist whose work occupies a threshold between performance and visual art. Davids was born in Jerusalem then she moved to Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in her early twenties where she is still currently based. She attended the Remscheid Academy in Germany (an academy of fine arts and media education for young people) where she studied dance pedagogy, in addition to the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam (an independent art institution), and the Pratt Institute in New York (a school of art, design and architecture) (Davids, *No Object* 143). Davids studied choreography from an early age, and she was introduced to the works of American postmodern choreographers from the Judson Dance Theatre group such as Trisha Brown, Yvonne Reiner and Steve Paxton. Even though Davids did not pursue dance practice, those artists asserted a great influence on her art works, particularly in their use of space, objects and everyday movement. Her early physical background in dance and movement left a mark on her approach to painting, which she saw as a way of creating imagery out of the three-dimensionality of the body and the objects. She later shifted her attention from dance to visual art, which she started to practice from around the mid-1990s. Shortly afterwards, her work was presented in solo and group exhibitions in Amsterdam, and from then on, it was quickly exhibited internationally, mainly in Europe (Davids, Personal Interview).

Davids's work in the last fifteen years or so has been loosely described as 'body art,' 'living sculptures,' or 'performance installations,' in which the main subject and material of the work is the co-presence of human bodies and physical objects. The artist challenges the fixity of most classifications of her work, suggesting that it could be defined as ‘performances without true beginnings or definite ends’ (Davids, *No Object* 6). The installations primarily create situations where the live human body and physical objects are in direct interaction in the space of the gallery. The gallery is used as a non-representational space that emphasises the lack of theatricality, narrative or dramatic action, which serves the anti-illusionistic nature of Davids’s installations; how they reveal the dynamics of their making. And as Jon Erickson argues, art galleries provide performance artists with an appropriate structure for viewing the body as object, since they are ostensibly places where objects, not social selves, are on display (66).

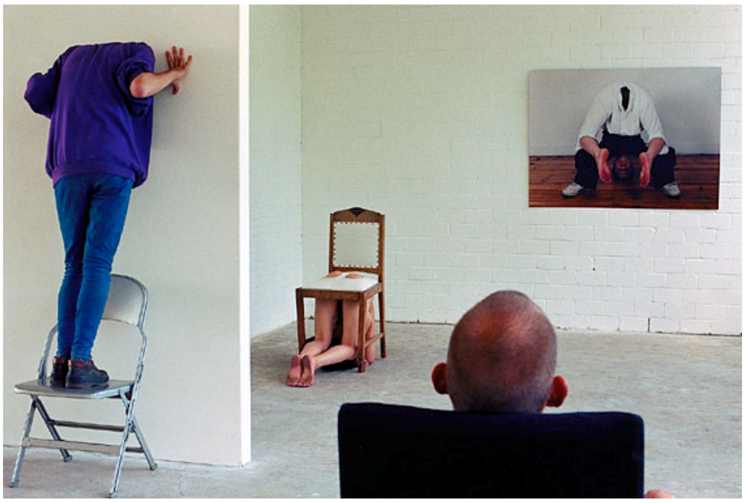

Fig. 44. *No Body at Home* (1996). Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam. Photo by Andre van Bergen [70]

Often employing everyday objects or household furniture, such as chairs, tables, mattresses and walls, occupied by silent, almost still human performers, her work presents hybrid forms of ‘objectified’ bodies, or ‘bodied’ objects. *No Body at Home* (1996), for example, is a performance installation consisting of several individual works, all negotiating an interdependency between performers and pieces of furniture. It includes *Chair*, *Armchair*, *Mirror* and *Stool*; each in a different way is penetrated by a human figure.[71] Using her own body, or the bodies of others integrated into the works of art, Davids is preoccupied with exploring the body's meeting with the physical object in a series of works marked by ambiguities and paradoxes, and that speak of oppression, lack of expression and negation. The bodies in those situations are often bisected by the objects, which gives emphasis to fragmented body parts not to the body as a whole, producing uncanny and disturbing effects.[72] Almost all of her works are named after the objects presented in them, which gives the objects prominence, and also emphasises the shifting boundary between humans and objects. For example, one of the questions facing spectators in *No Body at Home: Chair* is: is it the body that is being referred to as the 'chair,' or is it the object?

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[70] All images of Yael Davids’s work are courtesy of the artist and the ICA.

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[71] In another work, *Table* (2001), the backs of four human heads are integrated into the surface of a table. From the outside, the image is of people sitting around a table, yet their heads are the objects of consumption.

[72] When performers vacate the object during breaks or at the end of a performance, they leave behind a hole or an empty shell with traces of human residue, marking a memory and a fragment of a body that was once present. The empty object signifies its loss without the human form that keeps it alive. 'When the art work ends, the object is no longer there' (Mihaylova, 'Neutral' 120).

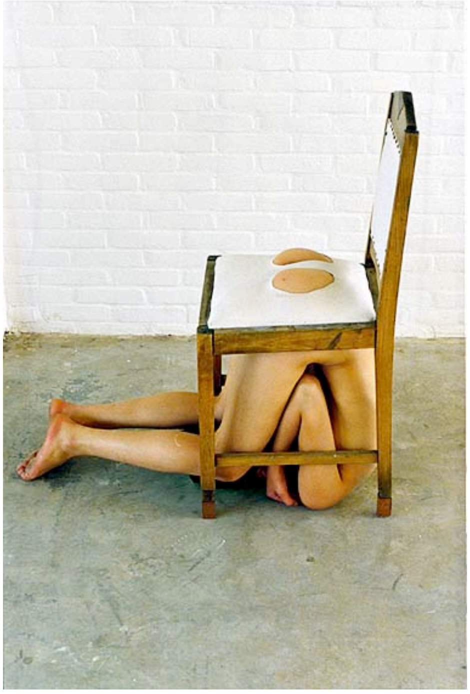

Fig. 45. *No Body at Home: Chair*. Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam (1996). Photo by Andre van Bergen

Absence and silence are key in the vocabulary of these works. The pieces predominantly portray images of absence contained in the presence of human entities in a series of disquieting living sculptures. From Davids's work stems a pressing urge to foreground the human corporeality as separated from the social self, stripping it down to its most 'abstract' existence. 'Awareness [of the self] is like an enemy,' she states in relation to her preference that performers do not see an image of themselves while being part of her work (Personal Interview).

'Denial' is a word she often refers to, and that emanates from the visual landscapes of her work, perhaps in an attempt to find an answer by escaping it: a denial of identity; history and reality; a denial of the gaze; a denial of self and subjectivity; a denial of expression or of speech; an embracing and a denial of the body. There is often a sense of loss, emptiness and self-dissent; being there, but also being absent; being part of, and also detached from the outside world. The artist's sense of denial is partly an echo of her self-imposed exile and her ambivalence towards the notion of ‘home,’ which is enhanced by her inability to return to her homeland that turned into a colonising state as a consequence of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. For her, the denial is a form of grief associated with the disconnection from heritage and the loss of personal memories. The sense of denial is increased by the inability to return to those things. As she states, ‘I come to Israel every time the perception changes, and I feel less and less at home. […] I think I cannot really go there. […] I find it too heavy to take part in the state’ (Telephone Interview).

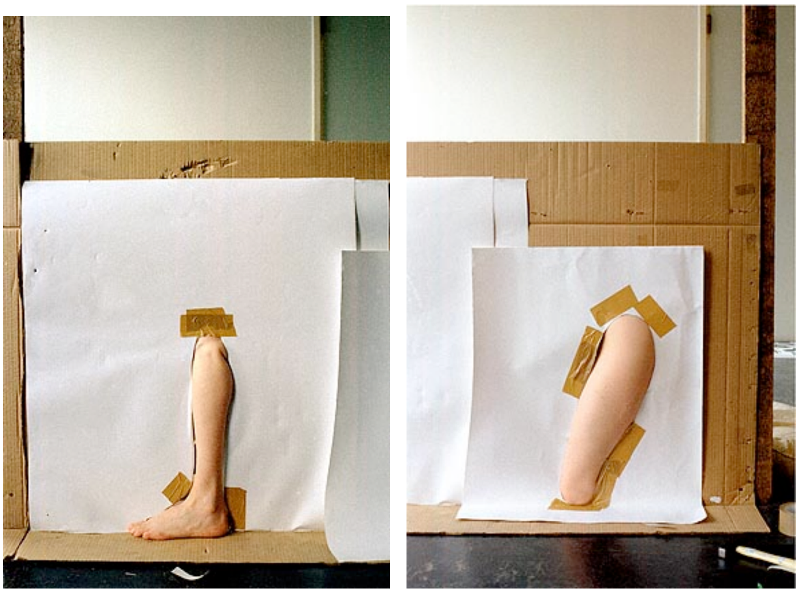

Fig. 46. *Body Parts* (2001). Print.

Davids’s views and feelings towards the situation in Israel and Palestine, particularly the injustices and violations against the Palestinian people, are symbolically voiced in her installations. Her work is not explicitly political, nor does it claim an intention to express political issues. The artist avoids such categorisation in order not to reduce political concerns into crude propaganda, or to turn them into a commodity. The main drive behind creating has been exploring with form and materials, and subverting reality and human beings' relationship to their environment. Issues of politics subtly manifest themselves, sometimes simply through the dynamics of her work with collaborators and performers during the making processes. As she puts is, 'my work has a political background or aiming but I'm never exclusively mentioning: this is "political art"' (Telephone Interview). Meanings in Davids's works are not limited to her socio-political background; they are open for a multiplicity of interpretations.

Davids's installations speak of the complexities of the sense of loss and separation, offering a subtle critique of the condition of human beings oppressed, in conflict and on the threshold between presence and absence. The loss of language and the denial of the voice are recurrent motifs in most of her installations, as will be discussed below, which is linked to ideas of lack of communication, oppression, passivity and the denial of the other eminent in her personal articulation of the situation in the state of Israel. The existence of the Separation Wall in the West Bank; an object that cuts through the Palestinian land like a deep wound with devastating effects for Palestinians, has a strong presence in the consciousness of the artist. A wall frequently appears in most of her created pieces, always cutting through the body and dividing the space into two different realities. I will return to the political connotations and the metaphor of the wall in Davids's work below while discussing one of her recent installations.

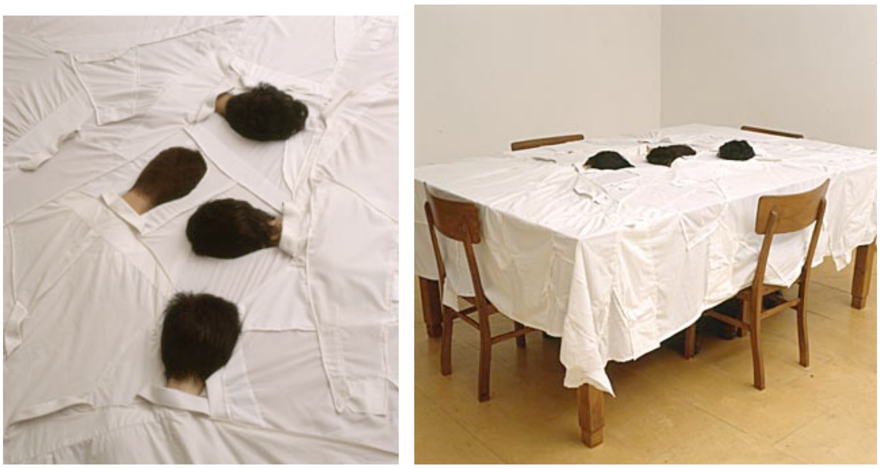

Fig. 47. *Table* (2001). Galerie Akinci, Amsterdam.

4.3. Objectification and Resistance

Davids emerges artistically from the mid 1990s, a decade that witnessed a regenerated concern with the implications of representing the embodied subject in art practices as fragmented, dispersed and particularised, encouraging the spectator's committed engagement.[73] As in Amelia Jones's contextualisation of this body of work, it clarifies 'the subject's interrelatedness with the world (of others as well as things)' and its inevitable existence as simultaneously subject and object (*Body Art* 18). Recent body-oriented practices either celebrate or lament the fragmentation, the decentering and the dislocation of the self, often using technologised modes of presentation. The interdependence between the body and material environment characteristic of these works is demonstrated in Davids's consistent experimentations with the relationship between the body and domestic objects in a series of works that are not technically complex or technologically driven. In those works,

> The reinvested gaze of the audience transformed this domestic furniture

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[73] This came after a period in the 1980s that was largely characterised by a turn away from representing the live body, especially the female body, in art practices in an attempt to resist the fetishising effects of the gaze. This historical and theoretical point will be discussed further below.

> as they became aware of a disturbing/disquieting living presence in space. These inanimate objects are absorbed and metabolized in Davids' practice by their combination with a minimally animate human presence in a sort of frozen, entranced atmosphere. No sudden action, no naturalized effort is displayed by the performer: there is only a very intense and silent concentration on pure presence. (Bernardelli qtd. in Davids, *End*)

Those works, which the artist has been presenting since 1994, share a consistent sense of loss as well as an absence contained in the present body. Works such as *Pillar* (1995), *No Body at Home* (1996), *Body Parts* (2001) and *Cupboard* (2001) try to enact a diffused contemporary subject by literally presenting the body as fragmented and vulnerable, with no coherent or expressive subject to be assumed.[74] The human figures in the art pieces are almost always silent or silenced by the object, whether it is a wall, a pillow or a breathing tube. There is a consistent desire to deny speech and to escape the abstract and symbolic order of language, focusing more on the body and its physicality. Snejanka Mihaylova argues that '[t]he "no-body" in Yael Davids' work has lost its face because it has lost its language. The face here is not just the front part of the human head, but the surface of any expression. Any further attempt at expression wounds the entirety of the body' ('No Body' 130). The image generated by most of her performance installations is of a fragmented body, which signifies an interrupted or a dispersed attempt to speak.

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[74] In an exhibition programme, Francesco Bernardelli states that in Davids's work 'recollections, personal history and subjectivity play a background role which is filtered through formal and conceptual choices' (qtd. in Davids, *End*). The interaction with objects in Davids's work constricts movement, redefines performers' relationship to their surroundings and leads to the elimination of representation or dramatic action. This is reminiscent of the uses of objects and physical structures in postmodern dance as conditions for task-based choreography. It is also reminiscent of Kantor's idea of the 'zero zones,' where actors' interaction with objects, as in *The Madman and the Nun* mentioned in Chapter One, eliminates illusionistic character representation and shifts the focus onto the action.

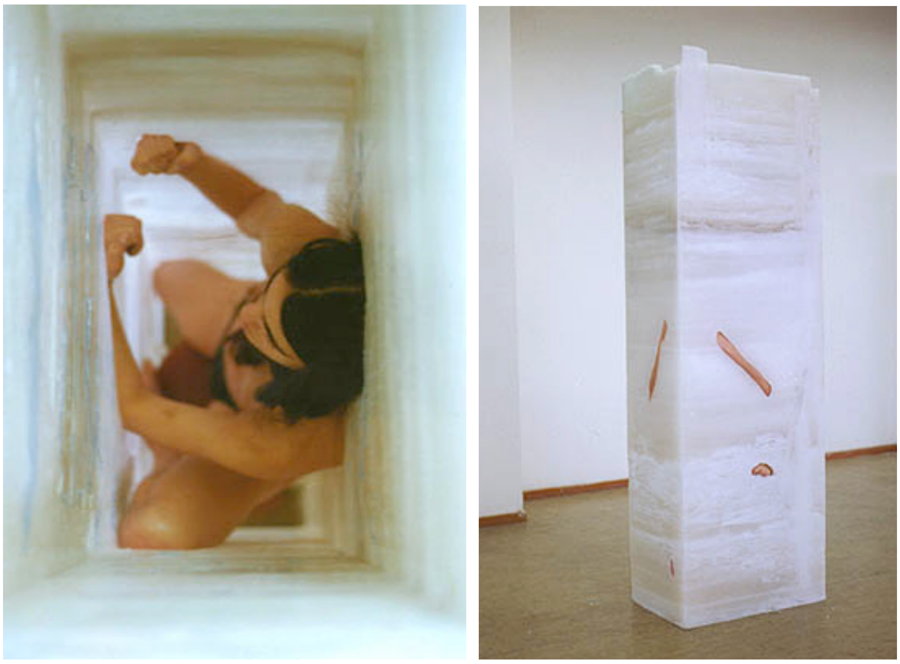

Fig. 48. *Pillar*. Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam (1995). Photos by Andre van Bergen

In *Pillar*, the artist's body, hidden inside a hollow pillar, is pushed against its solid walls. What spectators see from the outside are fragments of body parts. The striking sight of the living body parts embedded into the surface of the lifeless pillar evokes the tensions of incarceration and liberation; death and birth; submission and resistance. In *Cupboard*, the figure of a fragmented human body is visible from one side of a wall. It consists of parts from five different bodies of different genders that move and shift places inside a five-leveled structure placed on the other side of the wall. Each person extends a body part through openings in the wall that roughly correspond to the parts of a human figure. They produce in the end an image of a hybrid body in a constant state of fluidity and transformation.[75] The scattered bodies reflect the incoherence of the self, or a self caught in a moment of being and becoming.[76]

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[75] *Body Parts*, *Table* (2001) and *No Body at Home: Mirror* (1996) similarly show parts of bodies cutting through surfaces, and being cut by surfaces.

[76] Mihaylova describes this body as 'a metaphor of the anti-narration of the body' ('Cupboard' 132).

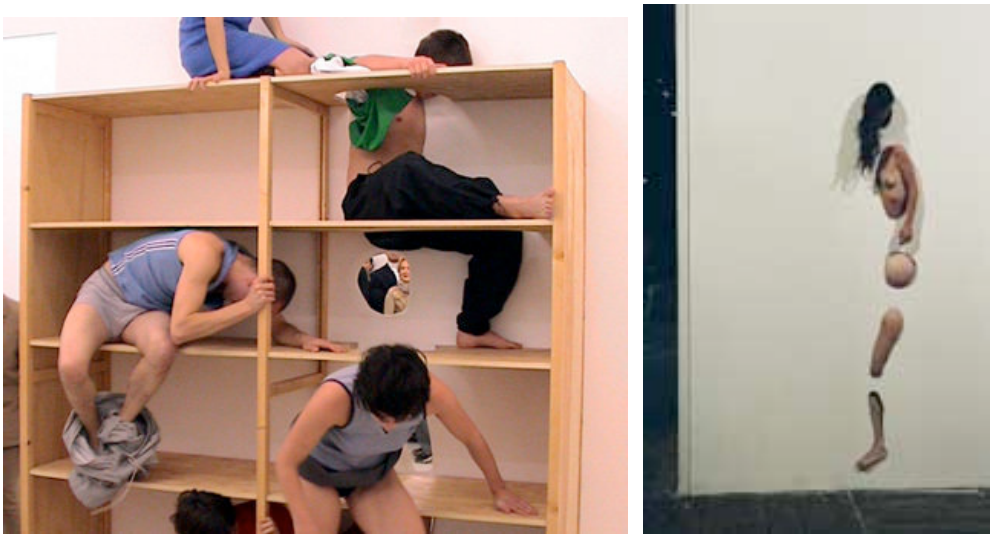

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Fig. 49. *Cupboard* (2001). Galerie Akinci, Amsterdam. Video stills.

These works produce a grotesque image of a body conceived as ‘a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception’ (Bakhtin 318). The installations, thus, confront spectators with a destabilising experience by questioning the familiar demarcation of body and object and by negotiating a presence and absence dialectic. The motionless, silent human bodies appear in order to disappear. They move into the realm of the ‘invisible,’ as expressed in Phelan’s theoretical response to the operations of visibility in live performance. In a later series of works, *End on Mouth* (2004, 2005) and *I Ask Them to Walk* (2005), the performance happens *inside* large hollow platforms, rather than on the platform’s surfaces. The bodies are completely hidden from spectators’ view; literally invisible, with nothing but their voices or the sounds of the performers’ movements heard from the outside.

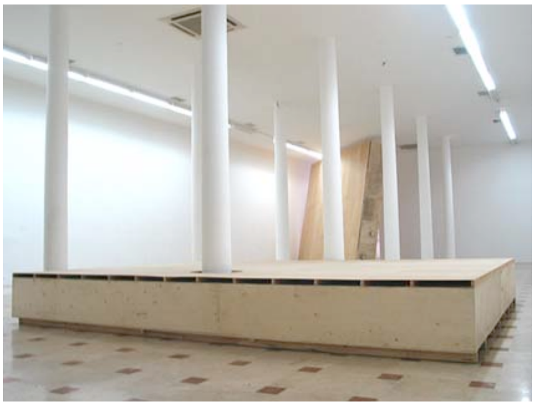

Fig. 50. *End on Mouth* (2004). Platform Garanti, Istanbul.

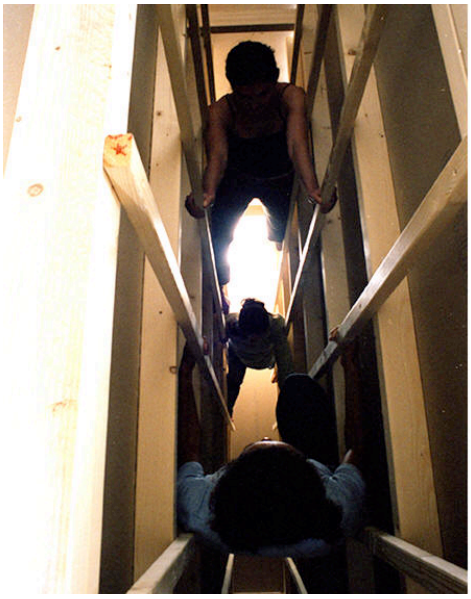

Fig. 51. *I Ask them to Walk* (2005). Smart Project Space, Amsterdam

The concept of objectification central to this dynamic governs the installations' underlying structure as well as their representational capacities. Paradoxically, objectification in the work functions as a representational device that does not necessarily eliminate the agency of the subject. As in the Hegelian understanding of objectification processes, objectification in this work is seen as a moment of externalisation that aids the self-realisation of the subject rather than becoming a cause for a rupture in its development. In such contradictory dynamic, the relationship between subject and object becomes of mutual construction, preventing the complete transformation of the human form into an object.

Resisting objectification is manifest in the mechanism of representation of the body in Davids's installations, and that does not fulfill assurance of resemblance nor the fetishising gaze, thus it resists the reproduction of Otherness as a form of negative objectification. Marvin Carlson explains that traditional representation, committed to resemblance and repetition, attempts to establish and control the Other as Same, which is the strategy of voyeurism, fetishism and fixity; the ideology of the visible. Therefore, he argues that if performance can be conceived as representation without reproduction, it can disrupt the attempted totalising of the gaze and thus open a more diverse and inclusive representational landscape (*Performance* 187-88).

Unlike mainstream or commercialised cultural practices, the body in Davids's work is not presented as a sign or as a representation of sexual or racial identities. This challenges the common view that representational visibility reinforces rather than challenges problematic aspects of reception that participates in the phallocentric dynamic of fetishism. This view, as Amelia Jones explains, was typical of 1980s art critical discourse. This discourse marked a shift away from appreciating the overt enactment of the artist's body. The criticism was particularly strong towards women artists who deployed their bodies in or as the work of art (Jones, *Body Art* 22-24) as in 1960s and 1970s performance art practices by women artists such as Carolee Schneemann and Yayoi Kusama (Jones, *Body Art* 1-9). Jones explains that the negative attitude towards body art stemmed from a concern about constructing women's bodies as an object of the gaze in both commercial and artistic domains. It also stemmed from an anxiety about the dangers of the artist exposing her own embodiment, thus compromising her authority (*Body Art* 24). As a way of dissolving the representation of women's bodies as objects of the gaze, this critique necessitated the removal of the female body from representation, or using what feminist art historian Griselda Pollock describes as Brechtian ‘distanciation’ that comes from a Marxist distrust of art forms that engage spectators as passive consumers rather than as active participants (Pollock 163). Distanciation was therefore seen as a crucial strategy for feminist artists that aims to activate the spectator as an agent in cultural production (Jones, *Body Art* 25).[77] Davids’s work shows a strategy of resistance that does not eliminate the presence of the body in the frame of the artwork. The body of the artist, or that of others, is visibly present, while at the same time it defies the reproduction of metaphors (of identity, sexuality and gender) imposed by hierarchical systems of value and condemned by the former critical discourse. The body becomes a carrier of signs, rather than being itself a sign. Therefore, the work does not reiterate the dominant structures of cultural consumption, as demonstrated in the following example of one of Davids’s early pieces.

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[77] While I acknowledge and agree with this established and well-grounded critical project, like Jones, I am confronted by my sense of unease towards dismissing wholesale the possibility of an embodied visual practice, or interpreting the representation of the body (in all its forms) through a hierarchical system of value that predetermines the ideological effects of such representation on the spectator. Such definitive evaluation of works of art in terms of an externally conceived structure of valuation, as Jones argues, reiterates the modernist authoritative critique that feminist theorists themselves tried to dissolve (25). It overlooks the ability of works by artists like Schneemann to activate the viewer, and to challenge the disembodied consciousness and the gender bias entailed in the disinterested Cartesian conception of self embedded in modernist art. These artists through their works attempted to question the reductive modernist mode of reception by presenting the fully embodied subjects in their particularities within an intersubjective dynamic of production and reception.

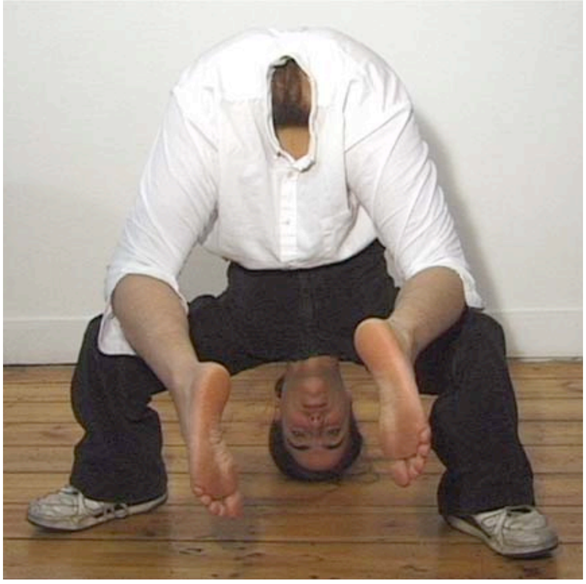

Fig. 52. *No Body at Home: Stool* (1996). Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam. Photo by Andre van Bergen

The unsettling image of Davids's body in the photographic image *No Body at Home: Stool*[78] immediately lends itself to the logic of opposites, which is one of the typical features of the grotesque life of the body for Bakhtin, where 'the essential topographical element of the bodily hierarchy turned upside down; the lower stratum replaces the upper stratum' (Bakhtin 309). By subverting the relation between the looking subject (the spectator) and the image of the other (the artist as the artwork), the conventional viewing experience and the stability of projection, identification and objectification are disrupted; the body defies 'easy access.' In spite of a body being objectified and visibly displayed, it resists being represented as an object of consumption. The focus on the human form does not satisfy a fascination with likeness and identification that encourages fetishistic looking. The female body, with its subverted parts and contorted position, its ambiguous relationship with its surroundings, disrupts the process of looking as Jacques Lacan identified it in the mirror stage.[79] Far from being an image of a body as a totality, it becomes an image of a fragmented body as that which Lacan identifies as appearing in dreams and fantasies, which he sees as a result of disruption in the early stages of ego formation during the mirror stage, and which he compares with the grotesque figures in Hieronymus Bosch's paintings (*Écrits* 4). The failure to recognise a familiar physicality in the work is emphasised by the inevitable failure to meet the gaze of the performer, marking the status of the body as hidden, not really there; unmarked. No particular body is assumed. The lack of reciprocal gaze between the body and the spectator eliminates the onlooker's illusion of mastery over the image, thus displacing the Lacanian experience of recognition.

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[78] This piece was also presented as a video image at some point, in which the artist added to the work the element of time (Davids, Telephone Interview). The video also shows minimal movement when Davids occasionally adjusts her position or moves her eyes.

Phelan argues that all Western representation exploits the capacity of 'looking,' or the exchange of gazes, to inform the desire to see the self through the image of the other (whether animate or inanimate), and to see the other in one's image (*Unmarked* 16). The gaze, in that case, represents a point of identification by which the spectator invests her/himself in the image, which turns looking into a form of self-representation: 'one needs always the eye of the other to recognise (and name) oneself' (Phelan, *Unmarked* 15). According to Phelan's psychoanalytic reading of the dynamic of looking, which is framed within a Lacanian psychic economy, this proposition is differently marked for men and women. She suggests that 'when the unmarked woman looks at the marked man she sees a man; but she sees herself as other, as negative-man.' The image of the woman is located within the frame of the phallic function as an image of the 'not all;' the 'lacking' which belongs to the man. 'The image of the woman is made to submit to the phallic function and is re-marked and revised as that which belongs to him' (Phelan, *Unmarked* 17). Traditional theatre and visual art is based on this system, assuming a male spectator and offering the female as Other, the object of the male's desiring gaze (Carlson, *Performance* 185).

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[79] The moment a child recognises an image of its body as a totality in a mirror that is crucial for the ego formation. The image of the body in Davids's piece is an inversion of that moment.

Breaking the Lacanian cycle of looking, Davids in *No Body at Home: Stool* made a strategic use of this formulation of the gaze in an ironic allusion to the phallocentric dynamic of looking identified in Lacan's thesis: the viewer is confronted by female genitals looking back where one would expect a male face of a body.[80] The body in this position seems as if it rests on an upturned head; a 'stool,' or as if the head sticks out from the bottom. The head; the site of rationality and the gaze, is inverted, hidden and undermined, becoming secondary in this image of subversion. Davids enacted on her figure a subverted projection of the forces of desire of the man who is seeing her. Thus the piece breaks the reciprocity of the visual exchange, disrupting the psychic and aesthetic dynamic of the masculinised gaze, which turns the visible image of the other into a sign for the looking self. Davids mockingly turns the pleasure in looking into the shock of realisation, reclaiming authority over her image. The image of the female body in *No Body at Home: Stool* seduces spectators into a close examination of such an extraordinary body, but at the same time, it resists the consuming gaze.

No Body at Home: Chair, mentioned above, also negotiates a similar inversion of the gaze presenting a 'negated' image of the body, and a reversal of the traces left on a chair by the body in the sitting position. The female body in that work is approached as a sculptural construction. The artist presented this piece with a male body at one point, which compelled a different reading. She believes that the physicality of the male body and the characteristics of its skin covered by hair emphasised a dominating subjectivity, thus the piece became about *a* man and *a* chair. The artist's intention was not gender-specific, but it was to highlight the body as a sculptural form on a par with the object, as she puts it,

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[80] Gender is assumed from the way the figure is dressed, and as suggested in Davids's *No Object* (128).

> what I wanted to approach is that I'm becoming an object almost, and the object becomes very subject. The object working *and* me. So I'm the passive and the object becomes active. And with a man it didn't work like this, because the subject was still a subject, and what I tried in this period to do was to play very much with the subject and the object. Negate the subject and give the object life. To make the inanimate things alive again. (Telephone Interview)

Davids, in the end, preferred to create this piece with a female body due to the 'cleanliness' of the skin that serves the formalistic quality that she aspired to create. Therefore, it eventually became a piece especially built around the female form that is then negated; 'the expressive form of femininity as absent, as a void' (Telephone Interview). This choice, however, underlines the female body as essentially 'clean,' thus 'abstract' or 'unmarked' in relation to the 'marked' male body that retains its subjectivity, which reiterates what is suggested in Phelan's argument in which she problematises the phallocentric cycle of looking. Approaching the body as a sculptural form, and its ethical implications, is an issue that is raised by the dynamics of subject-object interaction in Davids's installations. This point, and its relevance for performance, will be touched upon further towards the end of this chapter.

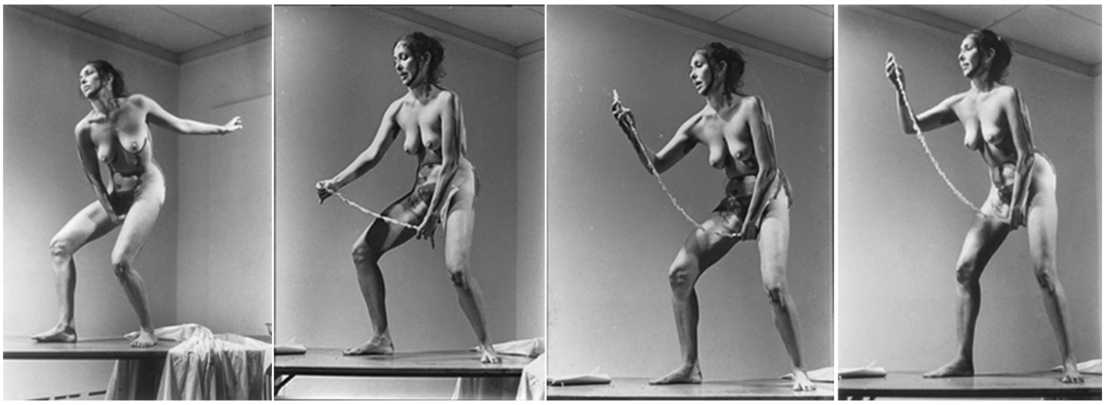

Fig. 53. Carolee Schneemann. *Interior Scroll.* East Hampton, New York and Telluride Film Festival, Colorado (1975). Photos by Anthony McGall

Exposing the female body in an enactment of objectification in not new. Other performance artists in the past have used the particulars of their female bodies as architectural referents in works that involved the artist's enactment of her body in all of its sexual and racial particularities. The artists explored the politics of the body in an attempt to confront the dominant patriarchal moralities of Western culture, as well as to compromise the myth of a disinterested art criticism, breaking down the distancing effect of modernist practice with its idealised conception of an 'abstract' self. In a well-known performance titled *Interior Scroll* (1975), Carolee Schneemann pulled a paper scroll resembling an umbilical cord out of her vagina and then read from it a male critic's attack on her work.[81] To challenge the masculinised reception and its modes of evaluation, Schneemann chose to perform herself as an embodied subject who is also an object in relation to the audience (her 'others'). She deployed her sexualised body in and as the artwork against the grain of masculinist assumptions that govern the modernist artist (Jones, *Body Art* 2-3). As Jones puts it, '[t]he female subject is not simply a "picture" in Schneemann's scenario, but a deeply constituted (and never fully coherent) subjectivity in the phenomenological sense, dialectically articulated in relation to others in a continually negotiated exchange of desire and identification' (*Body Art* 3). By exposing the fact that she is not a lacking subject; not an image of the 'not all,' Schneemann expressed her refusal of the fetishising process by activating an intersubjective[82] mode of production and reception as a way of exposing the masculinist ideology of modernist formalism.[83] However, Martin Carlson warns, even performances so disruptive, controversial and politically challenging, as those of Schneemann, risk with some audiences, being neutralised by the power of the reception process they seek to challenge (*Performance* 186).

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[81] I am referring to this performance by Schneemann, and another one by Annie Sprinkle in the note below, seeing them strictly as examples of overt and sexualised enactments of the female body and their relationship to systems of artistic consumption.

Davids in *No Body at Home: Stool* also negotiated the shift between the interior and the exterior of her female body, thinking of the vagina as a sculptural form, but unlike Schneemann and other performance artists, Davids did not project herself within an erotically charged narrative of pleasure. The striking use of the body does not foreground the personal or visceral orientation of past body art works. The strategic exchange of desire and identification negotiated in Schneemann's performance is not dealt with in Davids's, whose defamiliarised body is not represented as a site of pleasurable looking. The body is displayed as still, silent, absent from expression and from its own subjectivity, a kind of a stoic body or a sacrificial object.[84] The performer's body becomes active in its passivity through negotiating the invisible within the visible, or in Davids's own words, presenting '[t]he rules of the visible that render invisible' (*No Object* 110). The piece confronts the gaze with an uncompromising image of an exposed body that defies its own vulnerability and abjection. The body claims its own authority almost aggressively by facing the spectator with an object of desire and consumption presented in a volatile and destabilising form. Davids's works thus shifts away from the strictly antiformalist impulse of body-based performance art works as that by Schneemann. The work's distancing effect places it in a position closer to modes of presentation characteristic of modernist art, and closer to Pollock's idea of distanciation, but at the same time, it does not yield to modernist ideas of universality and abstractness. The work treats the body as a 'subjectified sculpture' that returns or makes problematic the traditional male gaze of the spectator, thus offering possibilities for disrupting conventional systems of spectatorship.

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[82] The phenomenological notion of 'intersubjectivity' views existence as a condition of reciprocality; an experience of the world as directly available not only to oneself, but also to the Other. The field of intersubjectivity, for Edmund Husserl, constitutes 'not only the internal coherence of one ego's experiences, but also the external coherence of one ego's experiences with those of another' (Laporte 341). This suggests experiencing oneself as different from the Other and at the same time available to her/him.

[83] In a later example, performance artist Annie Sprinkle invited the audience to examine her cervix through a speculum in *A Public Cervix Announcement* (Sprinkle). The performance was an attempt to undermine the traditional masculine eroticisation of female genitalia and to directly challenge the male gaze and the fetishistic myth constructed around the female body.

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[84] Even though the body in the piece belongs to Davids, its identification as particularly hers is not emphasised, giving the impression that the work can be performed by any female body. This underscores the lack of emphasis on the subjectivity of the artist as a constituent of representation in this work.

4.3.1. The Subject-Object Relationship as a Site of Violent Interaction and its Negation

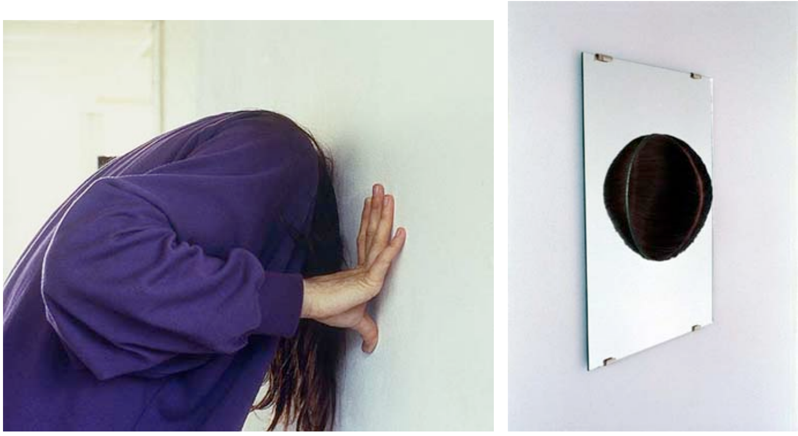

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Fig. 54. *No Body at Home: Mirror*. Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam (1996). Photos by Andre van Bergen

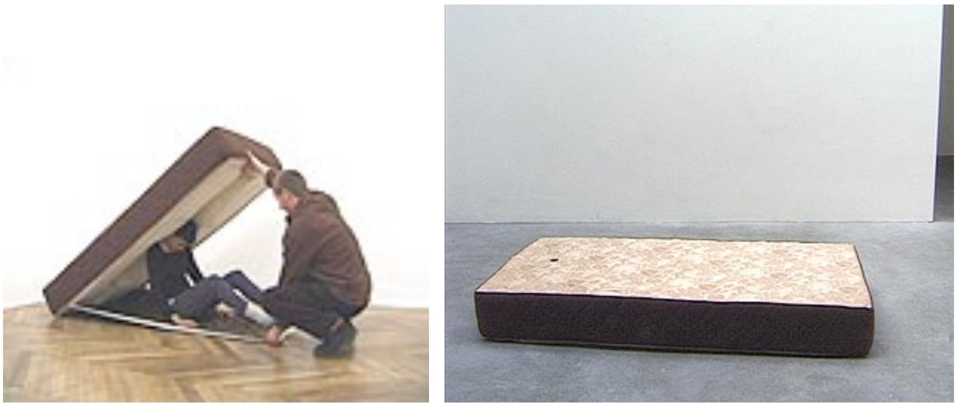

Fig. 55. *Mattress* (1998). Galerie Gebauer, Berlin

Davids explains that one of the fundamental systems underlining her work is that the body and the object are placed in situations where the human subject is denied the ability of expression, where the body is depersonalised. She tries to approach the body as the passive and the object as the active. For her, ‘objectness’ in those works is to negate the ‘I’ of the subject, and to perform an act of erasing that strips the body from its ego, its history and its meaning to find something new (Personal Interview). This is often indicated by concealing direct human references and by negotiating the tension embedded in simultaneous opposite states:

present/absent; inside/outside; up/down; occupied/vacant. Fragmented body parts, unseen faces, concealed eyes: something is always hidden from the body in almost all of Davids's work, the body never appears in its entirety, it never appears coherent. There is always something 'bitten off' the body by the object, turning it into what Davids describes as 'a wounded language' (Personal Interview), or a moment of uttering that is interrupted or incomplete. Especially the eyes very rarely confront the spectator. They are mostly invisible as in *No Body at Home: Mirror* (1996), *Corner* (1997), *Table* (2001), *Mattress* (1998), *Pillow* (2001), *Face* (2001) and *Music Box* (2003). In those works the face is turned away, buried inside pieces of furniture or concealed by objects. Davids represents the face as 'a negated object of seeing' that signifies the loss of language (*No Object* 121). The body and the eyes are averted from spectators' ability to comprehend, to see and thus to seize. As in Phelan's comment on Angelika Festa's performance *Untitled Dance (with fish and others)* (1987), in which the artist hang suspended on a pole for twenty-four hours, with her eyes covered with silver tape, '[t]he failure to see the eye/I locates Festa's suspended body for the spectator. The spectator's inability to meet the eye *defines* the other's body as lost; the pain of this loss is underlined by the corollary recognition that the represented body is so manifestly and painfully there, for both Festa and the spectator' (*Unmarked* 156). The same could be said of Davids's performances. The body becomes a 'no-body' for the seeing eye. The ambivalence towards human subjectivity, and the attempt to force the body beyond its expressive function and the social self are reminiscent of modernist art practices where a recurrent desire to denaturalise the body; to present it as something other than itself was manifest (Garner 53-63). Davids in turn creates moments of engagement between body and object in a dynamic of reciprocal transcendence as an attempt to inscribe each entity with new connotations; ‘the body becomes more object, and the object becomes more subject,’ as she argues (Personal Interview).

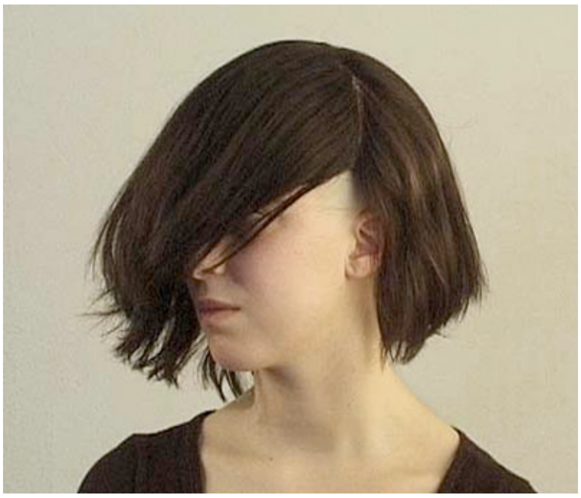

Fig. 56. *Face* (2001). Museum of Natural Science, Turin. Video still.

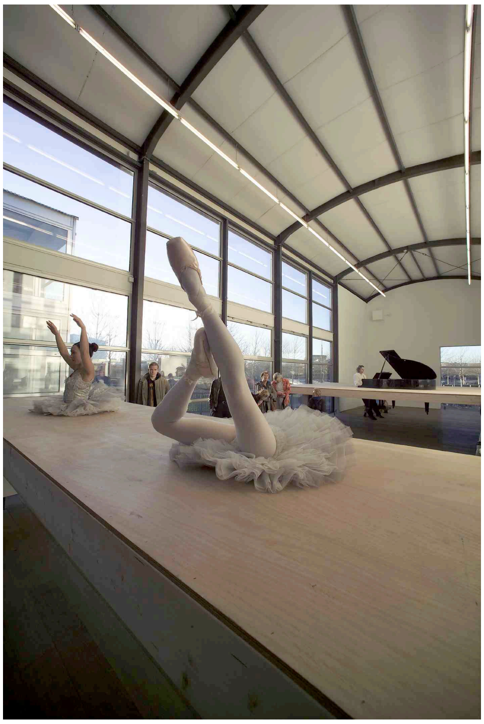

Fig. 57. *Music Box* (2003). Museum the Paviljoens, Almere.
Photo by Marco Sweering

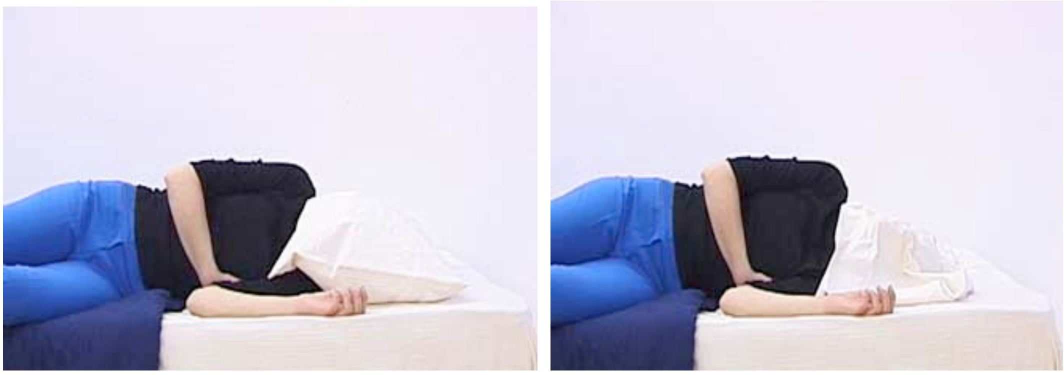

Fig. 58. *Pillow* (2001). Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach. Video stills.

According to this system of representation, the body at its meeting with the object is stripped into a state of 'pureness' thus it becomes abstracted for the artist (Personal Interview); a proposition that I question. What the work actually causes is not abstraction, but an experience of subjectivity that is embodied, transformative, interconnected with the world, not as transcendental. Jon Erickson emphasises the impossibility of reducing the body into one state or the other by arguing that even when performers' own internal experiences are displayed and objectified to spectators, it is found that the body still retains 'an air of mystery' (66). The body remains closed from easy access. He believes that the problem of the body in performance is that when the intention is to present it as corporeality, as flesh, as living organism itself free of signs, it remains a sign nonetheless. It is not enough of a 'pure corpus.' And when the intention is to present the body as primarily a sign, idea, or representation, corporeality always intervenes (66-67). The body could not be presented either as only a subject or only as an object, even if the intention is to objectify it; it always exists as simultaneously both, which proved the failure of the modernist project that approached the human body as a linear construct. The subject is present in Davids's work as simultaneously decentred; not fully coherent and also embodied; not purely 'abstracted.'

The work as I read it, and indeed as I have once experienced it, does not function within a dynamic of reduction or erasure as suggested above, for the subject eventually resists those dynamics. For while represented as the object of art, the body defies its own objectification. This could be explained in terms of Hegel's dialectic of negativity, as introduced by Julia Kristeva in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984). Kristeva understands 'negativity' as 'the mediation, the supersession of the "pure abstractions" of being and nothingness in the concrete where they are both only moments' (*Revolution* 109). Kristeva's reading of Hegelian negativity underlines the concept's embedded tension and the simultaneous existence of opposing states fundamentally inherent in the life of the subject. Hegel's concept is seen as a contemplative, theoretical system that links the objective and the subjective, producing the 'free subject' of the Hegelian aesthetic that transcends objectification. This freedom is understood as the highest form of nothingness; it is the negation of negation, as in the Brechtian defamiliarisation, that leads to realisation and a revitalised vision of the world; or a negativity that goes as deep into itself as possible and is itself affirmation (Kristeva, *Revolution* 110). 'Being' and 'nothing' within that dialectic are not understood separately as abstract, static identities, they are contradictory states that are at the same time inseparable; consequently the subject cannot be reduced to either of the two states of existence. This thesis prevents the closing up of the subject within an abstract understanding, so as not to approach it 'purely' as an object or as an 'abstract' entity. According to Kristeva, the Hegelian dialectic moves toward a fundamental reorganisation of oppositions, establishing an *'affirmative negativity'* as a productive dissolution in place of 'being' and 'nothing' (*Revolution* 113). Thus negativity establishes a thesis of tensions and contradictions; of being and nothingness; outside and inside;

negation and affirmation. It is an ongoing process that constitutes the identity and freedom of the subject.

Accordingly, the subject caught in a conflicting state of denial and affirmation, or within a dialectical process of appearance and disappearance in Davids's work, lies in a moment of 'becoming' that affirms the position of the subject. In Kristeva's terms, it becomes a moment of '[...] Becoming that subordinates, indeed erases, the moment of rupture' (*Revolution* 113). Kristeva's comment echoes the moment of 'sublation' discussed in Chapter Two, and which Hegel proposes in his idea of the dialectic that counters the negative consequences of rupture that comes after externalisation. This Hegelian framework is helpful to understand the modes of presentation manifest in Davids's installations, particularly what occurs to the body placed within them. The tension implied in the dialectic will be demonstrated further in the following section that looks at one of her latest pieces as an example where the shifting subject-object boundary attains political resonance. The piece, in which I have participated, will first be placed in the context of the group exhibition, *Memorial to the Iraq War*, where it was first presented, briefly looking at some of the different ways by which other artists responded to the exhibition's theme.

4.4. The Subject-Object Relationship as a Political Metaphor

4.4.1. Rethinking the Memorial

In May 2007 I took part in a performance installation by Davids. The piece, titled *A Line, A Sentence, A Word*, was part of the group exhibition *Memorial to the Iraq War* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (ICA). The exhibition interrogated the notion of memorial to a conflict that has not yet ended; a conflict that epitomises an unfolding tragedy extended in time. In spite of the ongoing conflict, the governmental chaos, the enforced occupying forces, the displacement of

Iraqi civilians and the declining state of civil society, the ICA asked a group of artists to make proposals for memorials to the war. The invitation to step into the future and look beyond a long-running situation was not an act of ignorance or denial, but was intended as an attempt to gain new insights on the situation by enacting the process of historicising. The aim was to see how that unfortunate episode of history can be fixed and materialised in time and space in hope that this would provoke different responses to 'encourage debate about what can or should be memorialised from this terrible episode' (Sladen). Given the prominent role that Britain has played in the conflict, and at a point when the British Prime Minister—who supported the participation in the invasion of Iraq—was about to step down, the organisers found the moment pertinent to curate such an exhibition, which would employ the capability of contemporary art to provoke social and political engagement. In the brief given by the ICA to the artists, the memorial was chosen as a material to diversely engage with; understood not as a definitive memorial to the Iraq War, but as a medium through which concepts of memory, time transcendence, mobilising social action and the implications of war can be addressed. Moreover, memorial sculptures' attachment to political and ideological narratives, leaning towards propaganda in some cases, generated a distrust towards the use of the medium, seeing it as a manipulated instrumentalisation of art. The uncertainty about the criteria for creating monuments, which can generate controversy, hostility and public disconcert, added to the charged nature of the form and provoked an urge to redefine its agenda, replacing it with new narratives.[85] Therefore, the exhibition partly aimed to interrogate the memorial form itself, examining its place in contemporary society and its ability to express present day concerns (Sladen).

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[85] Michael Rowlands and Christopher Tilley trace the controversy following some well-known memorials in the twentieth century. The Cenotaph in Whitehall, London was attacked after the First World War as being nothing more than a pagan memorial. A memorial to the ancient Mexican ethnic group, the Aztecs, in Sydney was never accepted because of a public outcry over its lack of respect

The ICA approached a number of artists from Europe, the U.S. and the Middle East, inviting each to propose a response to the idea of a memorial. The artists pushed the boundaries of the form, challenged understanding of the notion and nature of the memorial, and rethought the conventional monumental sculpture. They produced pieces of work that ranged between installations, sculptures, videos, photographs, printed wallpaper, performance and conceptual proposals (the latter were in the form of texts, sketches or photomontages of unrealised memorials). Some artists presented physical objects that approached the subject with detachment and a sense of irony. American artist Nate Lowman's *Never Ending Story* consists of a group of rusty U.S. petrol pumps from the 1950s and 1960s, suggesting a typical image of America's oil economy as well as a vision of a desecrated American dream. The petrol pumps resembled coffins, evoking the slab form of a commemorative monument.

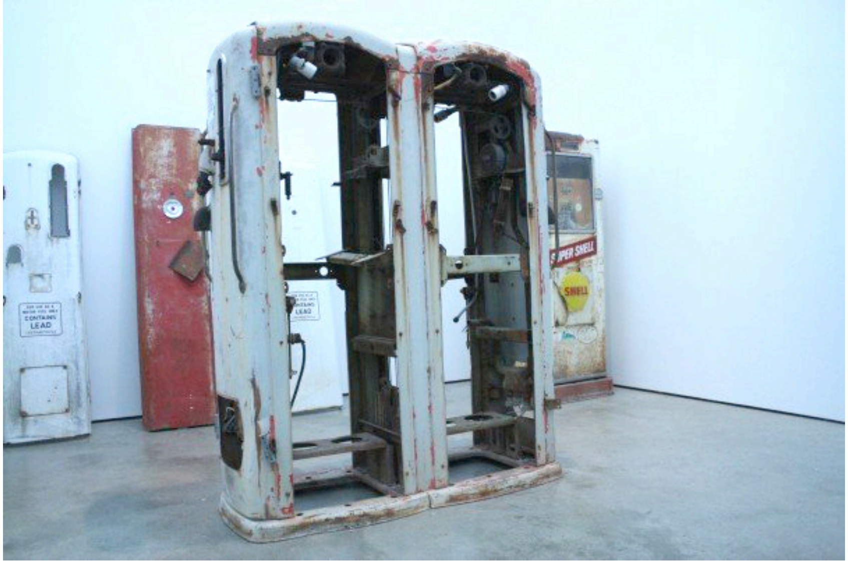

Fig. 59. Nate Lowman. *Never Ending Story* (2007). ICA, London. Photo by Nesreen Hussein

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for the dead. Controversy over the Vietnam War memorial in Washington centred on what was also considered to be lack of proper respect in the absence of obvious patriotic symbolism (503-04).

Other artists proposed works which were 'counter-monuments,' denying the permanence usually associated with a memorial as a marker of history and memory, thus destabilising the basic premise that history is stable and enduring (Rowlands and Tilley 505). For example, the German artist Klaus Weber presented *The Breeder*; a durational process-related sculpture that consisted of a hatching unit made out of a geometrical mausoleum-like steel and mirror structure. It held hanging butterfly cocoons that were left to breed during the course of the exhibition, allowing the arising butterflies to fly around the gallery space and out to the streets of London.[86] Some artists dispensed with the sculptural form of the memorial altogether, as in Norwegian artist Matias Faldbakken's crude and non-monumental *Untitled (Slayer upon Slayer upon Slayer)* simply consisting of the word 'Slayer' written on a wall three times on top of itself in black tape. The addition and repetition of the same content obscured comprehension and made the reading impossible. A complex conceptual installation, *The Dual-Use Memorial*, was proposed by the Iraqi artist Jalal Toufic. The installation was a response to the trade sanctions on cultural exports imposed on Iraq, which lead to its cultural isolation. Addressing the damage that has been done to the country's cultural infrastructure as a result of the sanctions, the artist required the ICA to borrow a set of books from the British Library and to gradually send them over the course of the exhibition, without permission, to designated libraries in Iraq as a way of replenishing their collection. Each borrowed book deals with the topic of 'dual use,' which Toufic's installation engages with as an explanation of how seemingly innocuous items were subject to embargo (Sladen).

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[86] The artist claims that the work refers to a ban on importing butterfly pupae into the U.S. imposed after 9/11 for fear of distributing anthrax spores using the insects as a vehicle (Sladen). He provides no evidence of this claim.

In diverse ways, the works in the exhibition questioned the memorial's ability to articulate human adversity, as artist Collier Schorr puts it, '[t]he most brutal thing about war memorials is how clean and tidy they are. They are everything war is not' (Schorr). However, the end result of the exhibition, and its attempt to counter the conventional memorial, shifted the proposal for a memorial into a protesting response. It was marked by a lack of orientation and a sense of hastiness in putting the works together.[87] Some critics accused the exhibition of being a collection of outstanding works bound together by a flawed thesis. Charles Darwent argues that 'Memorial to the Iraq War is, like the war itself, at best ill-thought-out, at worst opportunistic and cynical' (Darwent). Claiming the concept of memorial as the main rationale behind the exhibition was not firmly demonstrated in the selection of the presented artworks, which generated criticism of the exhibition's theme as misleading. After giving examples of the diversity and complexity of the contemporary memorial form, Robert Hanks felt that the artists in the exhibition tried too hard to subvert a tradition 'that isn't nearly as rigid as they imagine' (4). In their attempts, some of the artists went beyond materiality, signifying the impossibility of justly articulating the devastating effects of the war. Many of the powerful and provocative pieces in the exhibition were only hypothetical, which made them more relevant to express the failure and the complexity of a war that is not yet over; a war that is itself a monument to human folly. The magnitude of the catastrophe was captured more in the immaterial and the unsaid. And in spite of the exhibition's international resonance, it functioned more as a mirror to the Western self, looking at the absurdities of the war in a detached, contemplative manner. Sladen himself declares that the exhibition was primarily conceived for a British audience (Jackson). The exhibition as a whole could be seen as a distanced attempt to highlight a stark catastrophe by trying to utilise a conceptual rationale that did not engage enough in deep interrogation or unsettling provocation.

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[87] Robert Hanks in an article about the exhibition reveals that Mark Sladen, the ICA's director of exhibitions at the time of putting *Memorial to the Iraq War* together, remarks that, in addition to the lack of response in the British art world to the war, one of the impulses behind curating the exhibition was that when Sladen arrived at the ICA, there was a gaping hole in the schedule. 'I thought, if we need to stage an exhibition urgently, at least we should do it on an urgent topic. And if some of it was a little bit scrappy in its realisation, people would understand the spirit' (qtd. in Hanks 2). This contributed to the hastiness and eclecticism marking the exhibition, in addition to the vague criteria for selecting the artists. Sladen 'wanted some British artists and some American artists – artists from the two most important combatant nations in the Alliance – and I also wanted to have a good number of artists from the Middle East, […] an area where I definitely had to get advice' (qtd. in Hanks 2).

4.4.2. The Wall and the Body in Conflict

Davids was among the artists participating in that exhibition. Her response to the theme of a memorial to the Iraq war was a performance installation that interpreted the notion of memorial, not as a symbol of time and memory, but as a vehicle of protest as well as of oppression. The piece investigated the existential energy of expression in a situation when one's urge to express and protest is repressed by external forces. The idea was represented in an architectural construction extended in time and space and consisting of human bodies in direct contact with an object. *A Line, A Sentence, A Word* was initially inspired by journalistic photographs of demonstrations[88] and it is informed by Davids's personal views on the Palestine-Israel conflict. The artist saw the work as a subtle critique of Western hypocrisy—particularly bearing in her mind the role of Britain in the conflicts in both Palestine and Iraq—which is reflected in the exhibition that she saw as a fictional attempt to commemorate an ongoing war, while the actual conflict in Iraq, as well as in occupied Palestine, is confronted by a lack of effective, real action from the Western world. Davids tried in the installation to highlight the conflict and the incapacity of the West, questioning the passivity of her own actions, 'it's all very fictional now, including me, we're not really anymore part of the reality,' she states (Telephone Interview).

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[88] Davids followed historical events through journalistic photographs of demonstrations that had an impact on history. She refers, for example, to the protest against identity cards imposed on 'non-whites' in South Africa, civil rights marches in Washington, and so on (Davids, 'Choosing').

Her work's proposal published in the exhibition's programme is a meditation on history's instability. In her statements, Davids touches on the history of the Middle East as one that is marked by constant transformations and migrations. She refers to the disruptive influence of the 'hypocritical face of western society – the colonies' on the cultural and political landscape of the area (Davids, 'Choosing'), which caused deep and lasting rifts between nations. Davids recalls moments from her personal history, which is fractured by forces of exile, displacement and social and political discrimination within her own community. The artist is driven by an understanding of history conditioned by 'choice.' Choosing one's heritage for her is an act of independent judgment and an attempt to avoid the dogmatic and oppressive implications of the dominant historical and political discourses. Her desire is to 'expose' and not to 'impose' readings of heritage. Davids believes that history is often taken for granted, 'we walk through it but we really have to investigate it and to see which history we choose' (Telephone Interview). She refers to the dominant historical discourses chosen in the canonical thinking in the state of Israel, which imposes narratives of 'security' conditioned by divide and discrimination, which take part in igniting the conflict. The artist explains, for example, that her generation was taught a manipulated version of history that denied the truth about the Palestinians' enforced displacement by Israeli forces in order to build the Israeli settlements (including Kibbutzes) in the Green Line territories, where the

Palestinians once lived.[89] The popular narrative in Israel, according to Davids, declares that during that time, the Palestinians 'ran away' from their homes to neighboring countries, as an act of choice, which the artist realises was not the case; Palestinians had to escape the enforced occupation (Telephone Interview). The artist's disappointment and sense of responsibility compel her to challenge those dominant narratives and to choose her own understandings of history; an act of free will and self-recognition that can mark her as an outcast, as she puts it, 'by choosing your history, you can also be excluded from a place' (Telephone Interview).

The exhibition's proposal expresses the artist's disavowal of what has become of Jerusalem: 'the sight of the fanatics, the sight of hatred, a clenched fist' ('Choosing'). She argues that the exile of the Diaspora, and the Jews' subsequent lamentation of Jerusalem got reversed, '[n]ow the Jews have their state and they cause others to Exile, others to cry' (Davids, 'Choosing'). Davids openly denounces the Israeli occupation of Palestine, identifying a parallel with the situation in Iraq to some extent. She declares in an interview that '[t]he armies should be withdrawn from Iraq with the same urgency that the settlements should be removed from Palestine' (qtd. in Jackson). Her political stance and background underlined the performance installation in the most explicit way compared to her earlier works; the piece was an attempt to express the dynamics of resistance and conflict towards imposed narratives of oppression. The denial of expression embedded in those narratives was represented as a 'negated' urge to protest.

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[89] The Green Line, or the '1949 Armistice Line' demarcates the borders between Israel and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The borders were delineated according to the Armistice agreement signed in 1949 between Israel and neighboring Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The Green Line is also used to mark the line between Israel and the territories captured in the Six-Day War, including the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights and Sinai Peninsula (the latter has since been returned to Egypt).

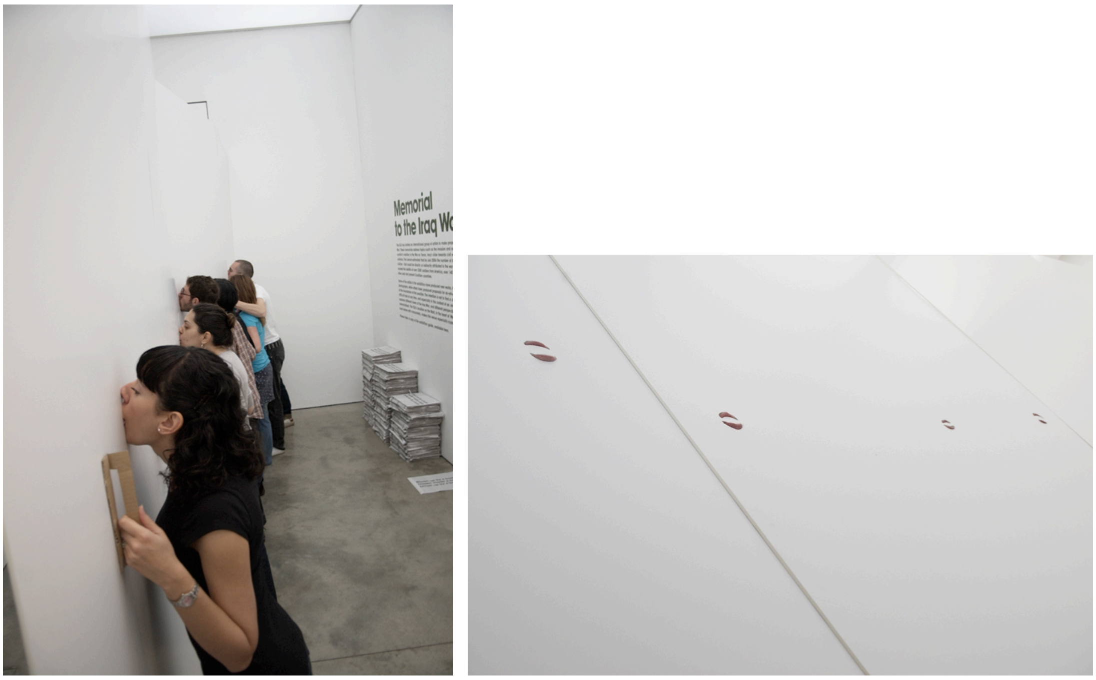

Fig. 60. *A Line, A Sentence, A Word* (2007). ICA, London. Photos by Samantha Hart

The installation consisted of a group of performers in everyday dress and with pedestrian appearance, holding flat, lightweight, panels by their mouths and hands. The task of the silent, almost still, performers was to keep the panels suspended in the gallery space, forming a makeshift wall for the duration of approximately two hours interrupted by short breaks. The participants were requested to place their mouths into holes cut-out in advance at various positions and heights on the panels. The work was placed in the middle of the gallery space so that its two sides were visible for spectators who were free to move around it. In this seemingly simple position, performers – including myself – were confronted by the white surface of the panels placed inches away from their eyes, which reduced their visual field to expanding whiteness; nothing much was seen beyond blank white, like being on the verge of losing consciousness. Movement was restricted and intelligible speech was muted. Speaking was physically cut off in space, which was visually emphasised by the sight of human lips scattered on one side of the wall, slightly gaped as if in mid speech. On the other side of the wall performers were visibly holding onto the object, pressing their faces against it as if in a devotional ritual of solemn observance or in an act of desperate yearning that was blocked by the solid object.

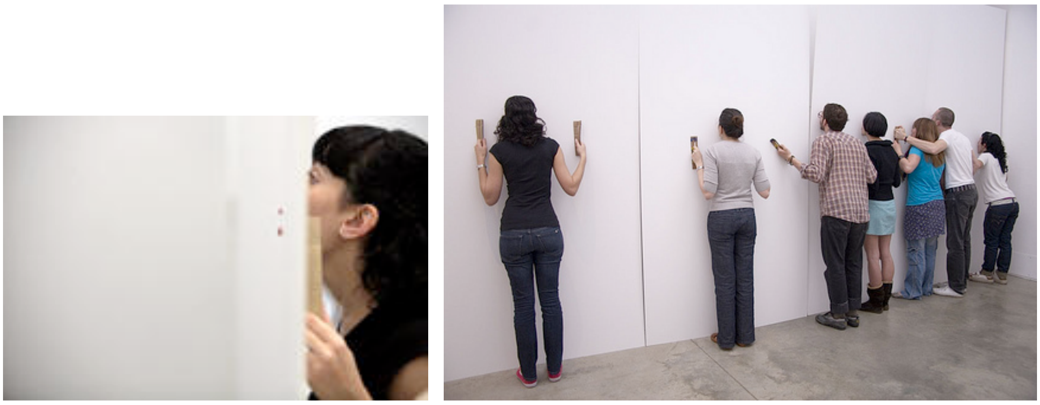

Fig. 61. *A Line, A Sentence, A Word* (2007). ICA, London

The installation showed human beings pushing against the wall. They could not see, but at the same time, they could not deny the ability to see. In that position, they gave away essential parts of their beings; their expression; their lips, while being denied the ability to communicate, to confront each other or to have a dialogue. The image evoked Edward Said’s declaration that in occupied Palestine, ‘[t]he language of suffering and concrete daily life has either been hijacked, or it has been so perverted as, in my opinion, to be useless except as pure fiction deployed as a screen for the purpose of more killing and painstaking torture -- slowly, fastidiously, inexorably’ (Said). The installation suggested an image of a confined subjectivity suspended in a vulnerable instance of metamorphosis between ‘thingness’ and ‘emptiness;’ speech and silence;’ it became a ‘spectacle that harbours on a curious borderline – between frustration and hope’ (Davids, 'Choosing'). The inability of the subject to secure a stable existence in either condition overlaid the work with a feeling of melancholy. The subjects appeared to be clenching to the object as if it was their only hope of reclaiming a lost state of being. The object as the nexus of this subject-object dynamic influenced the subject's relationship to itself and to its surrounding, raising the question of objectification at its centre and signifying the tension in the act of repressed protest: it is 'a paradox of visual speech within a locus of silence' (Davids, 'Choosing').

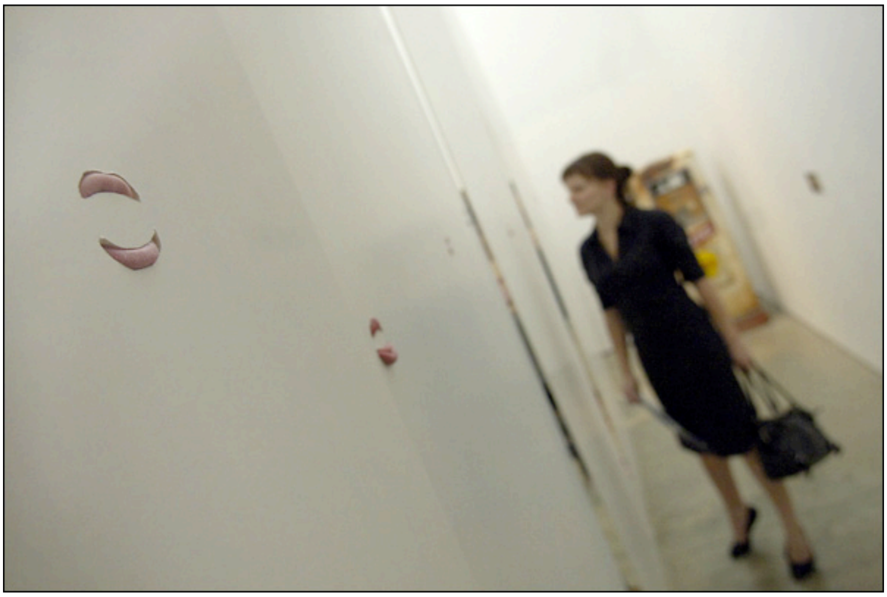

Fig. 62. *A Line, A Sentence, A Word* (2007). ICA, London

Looking at this piece from the outside, as well as experiencing it from within, initiated my attempt to examine the work's ability to offer a model of representation that functions within a mode of 'negated' objectification. In other words, and as in Davids's former installations, the human body is placed in a condition of objectification that, paradoxically, mobilises rather than denies subjective experience, highlighting the body as a site of resistance. The body resists being reduced to a state of 'pureness' as instigated in this choreography of stillness. While being part of this work, my corporeal experience was marked by a transient sense of aggression against my self. By committing myself to a position conditioned by an object, I was muted, almost blinded, restrained and provoked, but unable to fully react. The strain of trying to keep my still position ran through my body and my breathing got increasingly heavy. Spectators were tempted to touch my disembodied lips visible from one side of the wall. My body was permeated and the physical restriction left me passive and vulnerable. The curious interventions underlined my status as object; I was both passive and in control. My experience was a paradoxical act of 'becoming,' a body 'never finished, never completed,' as in Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the grotesque body, where the gaping mouth is emphasised as a site of bodily drama and accessibility (317). The openness of my body in that instance is what also connected it to the outside. Bakhtin argues that within such orifices as the mouth, the exchange of flesh occurs, which is characteristic of the life of the grotesque body, or in his words, 'the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world' (317). My sense of self was destabilised as a result of this corporeal juxtaposition, and the marked separation between myself as a subject and the surrounding object was subverted; I became both.

By disrupting the relations of power and resistance between subject and object, the piece embodied the futility of protest and the impossibility of dialogue, which are rooted in the reality of an occupied place. The complex set of relationships between subjectivity and objectification served as a meditation on the human condition oppressed and in conflict. These notions were figuratively articulated through the strong metaphor of 'wall' negotiated in the piece, and that brought into play images of constructions of walls, lines or barriers within different dynamics of segregation. Israel's Separation Wall in the West Bank, or even the Berlin Wall, are obvious examples of walls that carry powerful political connotations, and that signify dynamics of violence, oppression, displacement, as well as racial and social segregation. Especially the Separation Wall; the violations of Palestinians' rights it is generating, and the disproportionate violence it instigates in both sides of the fence, are echoed in a symbolic form. Cutting through utterance, blocking speech and oppressing action are materialised in the flat panels and how they push against human bodies from one side and show nothing but frozen lips embedded in the wall from the other side. The openings in the wall offer an opportunity to escape bound by failure, which is reminiscent of the regular frustrated attempts to defy the wall that cuts through the land; attempts that are usually met by brutal silencing forces. On the other hand, the holes show fragility and instability; walls are penetrable and bound to fall, they are not as 'concrete' as they seem.

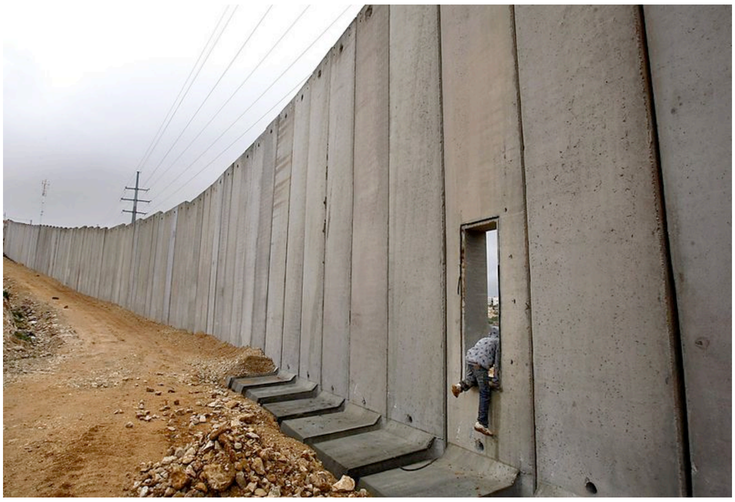

Fig. 63. The West Bank separation barrier. Shuafat, West Bank. Photo by Reuters

Looking at images of the Separation Wall, one finds resemblance with Davids's structure. The clinical whiteness of Davids's wall, in contrast with the humanness of performers, highlights the brutality of the oppressor and the violent blind erasure of humanity, history and identity. The erection of the Wall is an act of denial and a brutal attempt to cover the sight and erase the existence of a whole population, 'so the oppression is also by not seeing things; not wanting to see. […] people don't see, people don't feel the other. So the Palestinians are starving or whatever but no body cares, because the wall succeeds [in securing the safety and economy of Israel]' (Davids, Telephone Interview). Said's comment reflects the cruelty and irrationality of such an idea as the Separation Wall. He argues: 'has a crazier idea ever been realised in the modern world, that you can put several million people in a cage and say they don't exist?' (Said). The false security offered by the Wall to one side succeeds in undermining, even erasing the humanity of the marginalised on the other side.[90] However, as in the Hegelian dialectic, oppression affirms the impulse to resist and to fight to prevent its ravages. The opposites inform and constitute each other. This can be translated into Said's argument that Israel's ever-encroaching occupation of Palestinian territories, like all colonial brutality, is futile, and has the effect of making Palestinians more, rather than less, defiant (Said).

The impulse of resisting objectification was experienced in the installation itself. While being part of *A Line, A Sentence, A Word*, the emphasised subjectivity and the fluctuation between contradictory states became strikingly manifest when my lips were touched by spectators in a shocking instance of realisation that I became a work of art. However, that same act of objectification extended the boundaries of my body, connecting it to the surrounding and highlighting its phenomenological presence. The open flesh, as in the parted lips in the installation, blends with the object and with the external world, extending its own physical boundaries. Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that the intersubjective exchange between self and other can be a matter of a physical interaction embodied in touch as well as in seeing, which sees both parts of the exchange as carnal beings at once subjective and objectified. He suggests that vision is a material phenomenon that is embedded in touch and vice versa, and the chiasmic crossing of vision and touch is 'the flesh' of the world, as he puts it,

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[90] The International Court of Justice declared the barrier illegal and a violation of Palestinians' rights, writes Jen Thomas of the *Associated Press*. The barrier separates Israel from the West Bank and in places cuts into Palestinian territory. Israel started building it in 2002 to stop a wave of suicide bombing attacks. The complex of walls, trenches, barbed wire and electronic sensors constructed around the wall cuts people off from their property and basic services. Israel did not recognise the 2004 ruling against the barrier by the International Court of Justice, an advisory opinion with no enforcement mechanism. In 2009, the U.N. released a statement concluding that the completed barrier would close-in 35,000 Palestinians and wall-off another 125,000 on three sides. About 2.4 million Palestinians live in the West Bank (Thomas). The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, declared that the barrier is only part of the problem. 'The wall is but one element of the wider system of severe restrictions on the freedom of movement imposed by the Israeli authorities on Palestinian residents of the West Bank.' Israel must 'dismantle the wall' and 'make reparations for all damage suffered by all persons affected by the wall's construction,' she argued (qtd. in Thomas).

> If [the body] touches [the objects] and sees them, this is only because [...] it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs, because each of the two beings is an archetype for the other; because the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh. (Merleau-Ponty, 'The Intertwining' 137)

Merleau-Ponty suggests through the notion of flesh a two-sided boundary; that the body is both subject and object, visible and tangible, and it uses its own 'thingness' to connect with and gain access to the world. There is a reversibility of 'insertion and intertwining' between the seeing body and the visible body; between the touching and the touched, which crosses the boundary between the body and the world, since 'the world is flesh' according to Merleau-Ponty ('The Intertwining' 138). So being touched by spectators put me in the position of an object, but it also simultaneously emphasised my subjectivity. The interdependence of tactile experiences between my body and the spectator's reminded me of my fully embodied subjectivity within that moment of objectification. The relation to the self, to the other, and to the world was affirmed. I am therefore suggesting that the reduction of the body to an image in Davids's live installation is defied through negotiating the limits of objectification. The latter notion is reversed, insisting on the body's status as being. By enacting objectification, objectification itself is contested.

4.5. The Ethics of Performance in Davids's Installations

The negotiation of objectification processes in Davids's creative practice provokes thinking about the question of ethics, especially when it comes to the placement of the live body as part of the work of art. The work discussed in this chapter provides a useful example, particularly important in light of the ambiguity surrounding the issue of objectification prevalent in the discourse surrounding the subject-object tension introduced in the first chapter. In the situations that Davids's installations create, human performers interacting with objects are compelled to remain still, silent and inexpressive. They are required to be almost absent from their selves. Writer and art curator Juliana Engberg describes the body in Davids's installations as

> A vulnerable body displaying its privacy to the audience in an unsettling surrender. A still, quiet body, which makes no demonstration about its pain although it must feel the torture of the contortions which Davids demands. It is therefore a weirdly un-performative body that Davids places in front of the viewer. (Engberg)

Placing the performers in such situations forces their bodies into unnatural positions that entail a degree of risk, such as making breathing difficult or affecting the blood circulation. While being in *A Line, A Sentence, A Word*, the physical strain and the frustration of being silenced and partially blinded was uneasy to bear. Shutting my eyes and controlling my breathing helped to relieve some of the strain. As time passed, the breathing of the other performers next to me got increasingly heavy. One of the participants noted that the performance made her feel 'differently' about herself, and when spectators touched her lips it felt strange and unnatural to her.[91] The absence of mouths, or sometimes full faces in many works by Davids, emphasises the anxiety of suffocation. In *Aquarium* (1998), Davids places her collaborator's head inside a sealed tank of water. The only method of breathing is a tube, large in diameter, uncomfortably placed in the mouth of the performer who keeps his eyes open under water. A video footage of that performance installation shows the water leaking from the tank, running down the performer's body until he is assisted out of it. *Mattress* (1998) is an installation where a person hides inside a mattress with nothing but a small, circular hole cut-out in the mattress's surface in front of the mouth for breathing. In another piece, a child is hidden inside a large inflatable beach ball. Only his head and legs appear. The child is seen rocking the ball by his body and playfully kicking the air. He occasionally laughs or smiles to the video camera, but it is not clear how spontaneous this is. The sight of the child's confined body brings to question issues of safety, although it may be argued that a child may actually enjoy being in such position.

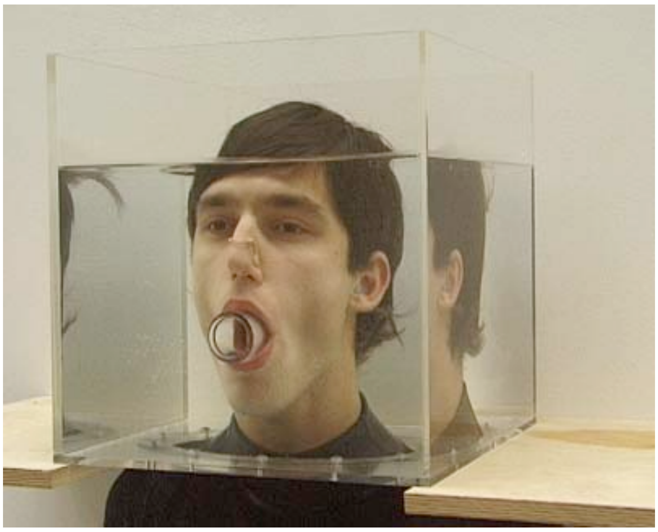

Fig. 64. *Aquarium* (1998). Melbourne Biennale, Melbourne. Video still.

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[91] I am indebted to Barbara for her comment.

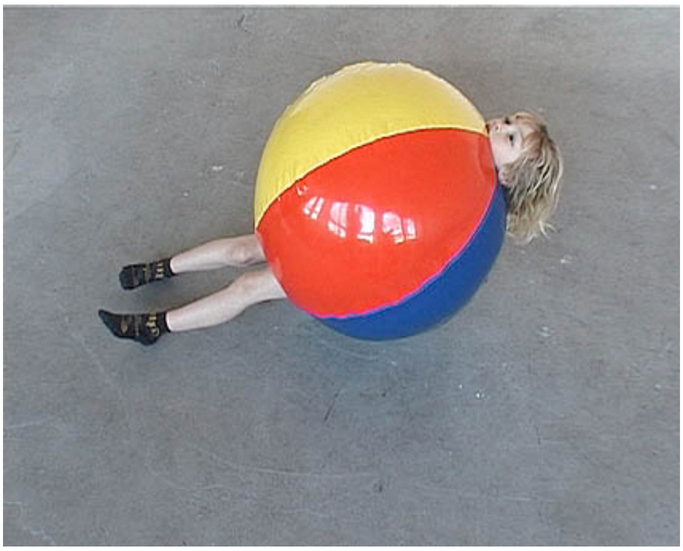

Fig. 65. *Ball* (2003). Video still

This is in addition to installations where performers, including the artist herself, are asked to crawl, crouch, lay down, kneel, hide, burry their heads or other parts of their bodies, sometimes upside down, in tight spaces or in uncomfortable positions for long durations. Some of the objects that performers are asked to engage with are rough or heavy to handle. Mihaylova notes that in *Cupboard* '[a]s time passes the tiredness in [people's] bodies, due to their constant, exhausting movement begins to be felt, and gradually has repercussions in the general visible field of the work' ('Cupboard' 131). Several photographs and video footage of different installations reveal the strain in performers' faces and bodies as they try to negotiate their awkward positions. These performances generate a relation to object that produces an uneasy reaction. This is performed with consensus and mutual agreement between Davids and her collaborators, but it is the authority of the artist that takes precedence. The material conditions of the installations; their designs and shapes, are set by her in advance, while performers are required to fulfil the roles prescribed for them by almost being 'moulded' within the installations along with the physical objects. The full effects of the installations on performers' bodies may not necessarily be known in advance.

This use of the body shifts away from past performance art practices. Engberg notes that ‘Davids does not go for the abject or aggressive action. Rather hers is a peculiarly mute approach and for some reason it seems all the more alarming since there is no catharsis necessarily which releases the audience from the symbolic horror of decapitation or suffocation’ (Engberg). In other words, Davids does not employ performance strategies typical of many performance and live art practices. The body made explicit has been employed as the mise-en-scène for a variety of Western feminist artists since the 1960s. As Rebecca Schneider argues, those artists’ aim has been to challenge habitual modalities of vision ‘which buttress socio-cultural assumptions about relations between subject and object, explicit body performance artists have deployed the material body to collide literal renderings against Symbolic Orders of meanings’ (3). These artists, such as Carolee Schneemann, critically engaged ways of seeing which have traditionally inscribed women as given to be seen but not as given to see, exploring, among other things, the paradox of being artist and object at once. Those artists made their own bodies explicit as a stage across which historical, political, cultural and social issues are foregrounded. The body was used as more than an active object. The body was unavoidably also the artist’s self in all of its particularities, not just the object of art. Schneemann, for instance, in her performance practice intended her body ‘to remain erotic, sexual, both “desired *and* desiring,” while underscoring it as clearly volitional as well’ (Schneider 37). The body was employed in its full subjectivity and sexuality as the object of art in a strategic move to destabilise predominant systems of art making and consumption that are dominated by patriarchy. Davids’s use of the body does not function within such dynamics of presentation. She even avoided labelling her work as 'feminist' or to be compared with feminist body artists at the time of creating her early pieces. Her work does not necessarily involve such deliberate use of her own body as described above, nor does it seek immediate reaction from the audience or to explicitly present aspects of her own embodiment and subjectivity. It is mainly constructed around the bodies of others.

Additionally, those 'others' are expected to maintain a stance of 'neutrality' by eliminating signs of characterisation, subjective and personal expressions or self-consciousness while being part of the work. Davids explains, 'I put people in a position where they can't show off. What can you do when you have your mouth open? You cannot act. How an expression can be expressed in an un-expressive situation?' (Personal Interview). Before taking their positions in the installations, performers are not prepared or trained in advance for their tasks in any particular way. The emphasis is on lack of awareness of the final image as a way of avoiding representation, relying instead upon unconscious stances; their casualty and quotidian quality. Davids recalls moments when the attitudes of performers changed after seeing images of themselves within her installations whether in photographs or video footage. This awareness at times made them 'act' their roles, which she tries to prevent. 'Awareness is like an enemy,' she declares, 'the performance is purely physical, I don't want people to think about meaning or emphasise it' (Personal Interview). What she looks for is a pedestrian, everyday quality in the performers' appearance, which is why she often prefers to work with non-performers, or people who can be present as themselves.

This approach to working with others raises the issue of the relations of authorship and agency at play within the creative process of a work that proved to be physically demanding for performers in spite of its seeming simplicity as I have experienced. The work seeks a certain way of seeing the body; not in terms of its full subjectivity, but as a depersonalised entity or as a sculptural construction. Davids once remarked that she feels uneasy about asking people to be 'objects.' Thus the work demonstrates a shifting concern between the agency of the performer and the aesthetic integrity of the work, and some of the wider questions raised by this may be: which is more important for the performance? What are the implications of employing performers 'physically' without involving them in the meaning or in the final result of the work that is actually based on their bodies? Who has the right to author such bodies? And considering the physical acts performed on the bodies of others, how could they be perceived in light of the responsibility and obligation towards the 'other' expressed in Emmanuel Levinas's understanding of ethics? (Ridout 52-53).[92] These are issues integral to many performance art and live art practices, particularly the relationship between the ethical and the aesthetic, and how in Davids's work, it fluctuates between invoking the economy of literal instrumentalisation of the body, and also negating it.

Peggy Phelan draws upon this issue in her article 'Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows' (2004). In discussing one of Abramović's performances, *The House with the Ocean View* (2002), Phelan touches on the possibility of mutual transformation of both the observer and the performer within the enactment of a live event, which is an important point where the aesthetic meets the ethical in a pivotal oscillation. The interaction between audiences and performers holds the possibility of alterations in each side, thus attaining significant and meaningful experiences in unscripted ways. Stemming from Levinas's understanding of ethics as that which is distilled in the ‘face-to-face encounter,’ the unpredictable force of the live/social event is where issues of ethics become foregrounded (Phelan, ‘Marina Abramović’ 574-75). Nicholas Ridout in *Theatre & Ethics* (2009) explains that this account by Levinas has encouraged a consideration of the relationship between audience and performance, in terms of the ethical situation (54). This point is particularly pertinent to Davids’s *A Line, A Sentence, A Word*, where the exposed and accessible bodies were subject to spectators’ intervention as described above. The spectators’ direct physical interaction was not invited by Davids, nor was it openly prevented, which, in addition to marking a moment of transformation for performers, raised issues of the ethics of action and passivity in the performer-spectator exchange.

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[92] Nicholas Ridout in *Theatre & Ethics* (2009) quotes Levinas's comment that '[r]esponsibility for the Other, for the naked face of the first individual to come along. A responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself' (Levinas 83).

In another essay titled ‘On Seeing the Invisible: Marina Abramović’s *The House with the Ocean View*’ (2004), Phelan touches on ‘the ethics of the act’ in relation to the audience’s intervention during Abramović’s performance *Rhythm 0* (1974) where the artist allowed spectators to intervene with her passive body throughout six hours using any of seventy-two objects, some of which were sharp or lethal, such as a gun and a single bullet. Phelan raises the following questions: ‘what does it mean to act when full knowledge of the consequence of your act cannot be known in advance? What are the costs of refusing to act without such foreknowledge? What keeps us blind to the consequences of our action and our passivity?’ (‘On Seeing’ 19). These questions, in addition to the responsibility of spectatorship, apply to the presence and accessibility of the live body in the gallery space in Davids’s work, most vividly demonstrated in the case of *A Line, A Sentence, A Word*. However, while the audience’s actions were invited by Abramović, forming an integral part of the performance’s contract between her and the audience on which she was partly responsible, it was accidental rather than invited in Davids’s piece.

Additionally, the intervention took place on the performers' bodies, not on Davids's, which furthers the complexity of the performance's ethical implications and the responsibility of putting the bodies of others under a condition of presentation that entails physical strain and a degree of intervention.

This issue is not exclusive to Davids's work. Approaching the body as an object has been a source of anxiety in performance and body art, and objectification in that way is associated with passivity, as I have explained in the previous chapters. However, Davids's work, in spite of a potentially problematic use of the live bodies of others, provides an opportunity to reexamine such anxiety. The dynamics of negation and resistance activated by the meeting between subject and object, and the dialogue between visibility and invisibility, lead to a reconfiguration of the operation of agency. The common anxiety towards objectification in performance art is seen in a new light, and a new relationship between the subject and the object is established. The human agency may not necessarily be under threat as it may seem.

In *Unmarked*, Phelan tries to delineate a possible ethics of the invisible as a way of rethinking notions of power and agency and, consequently, enriching encounters between self and other. There are points to be taken from Phelan's argument in relation to Davids's body of work. Invisibility for Davids is not attained by removing the body from the space of representation as I have shown, but by eliminating conventional mechanisms of representation that assert the body as fully present; physically and psychically. What the installations show is negative representation; an inwardness that negates visibility. It is invisibility that Phelan describes as 'the failure to see oneself fully' ('Performance' 296). In a conversation with Marquard Smith, Phelan argues,

> I wanted to talk about the failure to see oneself fully. This failure is

> optical, psychoanalytical, and ethical. The wager of the book [*Unmarked*] was to see if we could use this failure as a way to re-think what we mean by power, what we mean by representation, what we mean when we imagine our encounters with the other. I was suggesting that this central failure, instead of being constantly repressed by culture, might be something we could acknowledge and even embrace. If this were possible, I thought perhaps a different ethics, a richer encounter between self and other might become actual and actual-izable. ('Performance' 296)

This frame of thinking about ethics in performance art could be used to look at the ethical ambiguity in Davids's work. The ethics of performance in her installations would, therefore, seem to depend upon an ability to read them beyond the repressive boundaries of objectification. It is an ability to see the installations as performances that emphasise the human as material and independent from the object as the 'other,' but at the same time, that relies on that other for its existence and survival. The discomfort, the exhaustion and awkwardness that her performers go through are integral to the creation of the work, as well as to its viewing experience. They even cause alterations in the final image and its shape. The struggle, the shuffle, the tension, the spectators' uneasiness or intervention, are common in most readings of her installations. The struggle is not hidden; the difficulty of the positions the humans are placed under is not disguised. The mechanisms of the installations and the vulnerability of the human body are fully revealed to spectators to witness and to endure. Thus the work is not just about the bodies and objects ('others'), but it is also about the nature and the demands of their interaction that cannot escape the violence of the encounter. Ridout explains that Phelan's notion of the ethical suggested in her essay 'Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows' proposes ways in which

> an ethical 'reawakening' might help us think and feel about those others we only ever encounter as images amid the media saturation – as 'shadows', in fact. Phelan implies, I think, that work such as this

> calls its spectators to bear witness to precisely those victims of historical traumas (such as the Nazi genocide) whose deaths have called into question the ethical basis of enlightenment modernity. (Ridout 61)

This similarly occurs in Davids's work. The political segregation and human rights' violations in the Palestinian occupied territories are examples of the 'historical traumas' to which Ridout refers. Thus the placement of human bodies in Davids's unsettling work also invites the audiences as witnesses, calling to mind images of vulnerable bodies in various situations of confinement that exist outside the frame of the work, which plays part in activating spectators' ethical response. Therefore, it seems that her work's ethical potential may lie in its ambiguous relationship to the issue of ethics. This matches Ridout's suggestion that performances that do not engage with the question of ethics might still have ethical value or encourage a reorientation of ethical thought (9). It is a work that could provoke an ethical response by 'conftront[ing] its spectators or participants with something radically other, something that could not be assimilated by their existing understanding of the ethical' (Ridout 67). Davids's work; with its lack of narrative, lack of drama, or lack of request for a specific reaction from the audience; provides a chance to contemplate and rethink notions of the ethics of performance.

4.6. Conclusion

The work discussed in this chapter invests in the shifting subject-object boundary in ways that open this relationship for a diversity of interpretations and that endow it with political connotations. In those works, the body in performance interacts with the object, constructs it, deconstructs it, occupies it, and sometimes merges with it in full unity. The focus is turned onto the process of creation rather than the production of art objects. In this temporal process, the relationship between subject and object is of interdependence and mutual construction, thus the work cannot be viewed or interpreted without considering both sides of the exchange. The object itself becomes imbued with the performance that created it. Within this condition of creation, it is found that the object acquires a degree of 'agency,' asserting a powerful presence and causing change and transformation for the subject that is in direct contact with it. However, the agency of the subject cannot be denied in this dynamic, for it asserts its agentive power, resists being dominated by objectifying forces, and defies violent 'erasure,' which was demonstrated in my experience inside one of Davids's pieces.

The paradoxes embodied in *A Line, A Sentence, A Word* ruptured my awareness of my own subjectivity and at the same time enacted the pain inherent in subjectivity. It highlighted the sense of loss at the heart of human consciousness in its fluctuation between subjectivity and thingness. This paradox is implied in Phelan's comment on the capability of performance to use the body 'to frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body' (151), and Davids enacts this 'lack of Being' through the staging of mis-recognition. The body is represented as a site of displacement and absence instead of seeing it as a site of pleasure and desire as in mainstream forms of representation. Davids's work disrupts the stability of projection and identification through experimenting with structures of seeing and by shifting between visibility and invisibility. The presentation of the body does not attempt to expose the self or to open it to the projections and desires of the audience, as in Kusama and Schneemann's performances. My body in *A Line, A Sentence, A Word* was visibly present to be looked at, and sometimes to be touched, but by re-plotting the relationships between subject and object, perceiver and perceived, the traditional complicity of visual exchange between the seen and the seer is challenged, and the act of looking as a site of desire and oppressive objectification is destabilised; thus the fragility of looking is unveiled. This dialectic of negativity gives power to the invisible within the visible, or in Phelan's words 'the blind spots laced through the visual field' (1).

Davids's work does not strictly lie in the object itself, it actually lies in the process of becoming; in the 'blind spots' where the gaze of the spectator is invited, '[t]he "thought body" refracts objectivity and transfers its visibility to the process of representation itself. The object loses its objectivity and the body its physicality' (Mihaylova, 'No Body' 130). This suggests that it is within the space between oppositions that the subject and the body can be represented. Consequently, the interplay of power and agency between the subject and the object invites a reconfiguration of notions of ethics and the implications of employing the human form as an object.

On the level of the wider political conflict, which is explicitly addressed in one of Davids's installations, the tensions in paradoxical human experiences are tied to the 'wall' that stands as a marker of political and social segregation. The subjects' engagement with the object/wall signifies their oscillation between an act of protest and its denial; objectification and its resistance; contradictions that persist in the experiences of subjects in conflict and under oppression. In addition to reading it as a possible reference to the oppression of the Palestinian people as the subjugated side of the divide, whose oppression is a trigger to further action, the performers' presence has wider universal and social resonances as human beings whose abilities to protest, communicate and exchange are being oppressed or negated. As in Davids's description, '[h]ere you see all this energy directed at uttering a word, a sentence, but still there is the impossibility of talking or saying something' (qtd. in Jackson).

The wall is a common object in many of Davids's work, often perceived as a splitting wound. The idea of divisions is embedded in the artist's consciousness, echoing the wounding effects of the Separation Wall that violently cuts a place into two opposing, uneven realities; '[one] side with an army and a country: the other is a stateless dispossessed population of people without rights or any present way of securing them' (Said). One side is of 'something,' the other is of 'nothing.' The end result in *A Line, A Sentence, A Word* is an engaging and conceptually complex representation, but that is still incapable of capturing the magnitude of the real-life oppression and the inhuman marginalisation of an entire population. The artist's powerful personal and highly politicised conceptual proposal published in the exhibition's programme goes beyond what the actual installation manages to reveal, which was in its still maturing stage of development at the time it was presented at the ICA. The installation showed a cool evocation in comparison to the personally and emotionally charged proposal.

The installation was developed in the following years and it was presented in different phases and locations without bearing explicit connections to the war in Iraq or to the Palestine-Israel conflict, although it maintained its physical form and the 'universal' ideas of protest, resistance and the boundaries of language. In an exhibition in Bolzano, Italy in 2009, it is stated that in that performance, 'Davids confronts us with various questions. When does a line become a word and then a sentence? Can a boundary or a wall also function as a mask? She translates these concepts into a choreography for objects and performers' ('Yael Davids: A Line'). It is not explicitly stated whether the piece still stands as a critique of the political situation in the occupied territories.

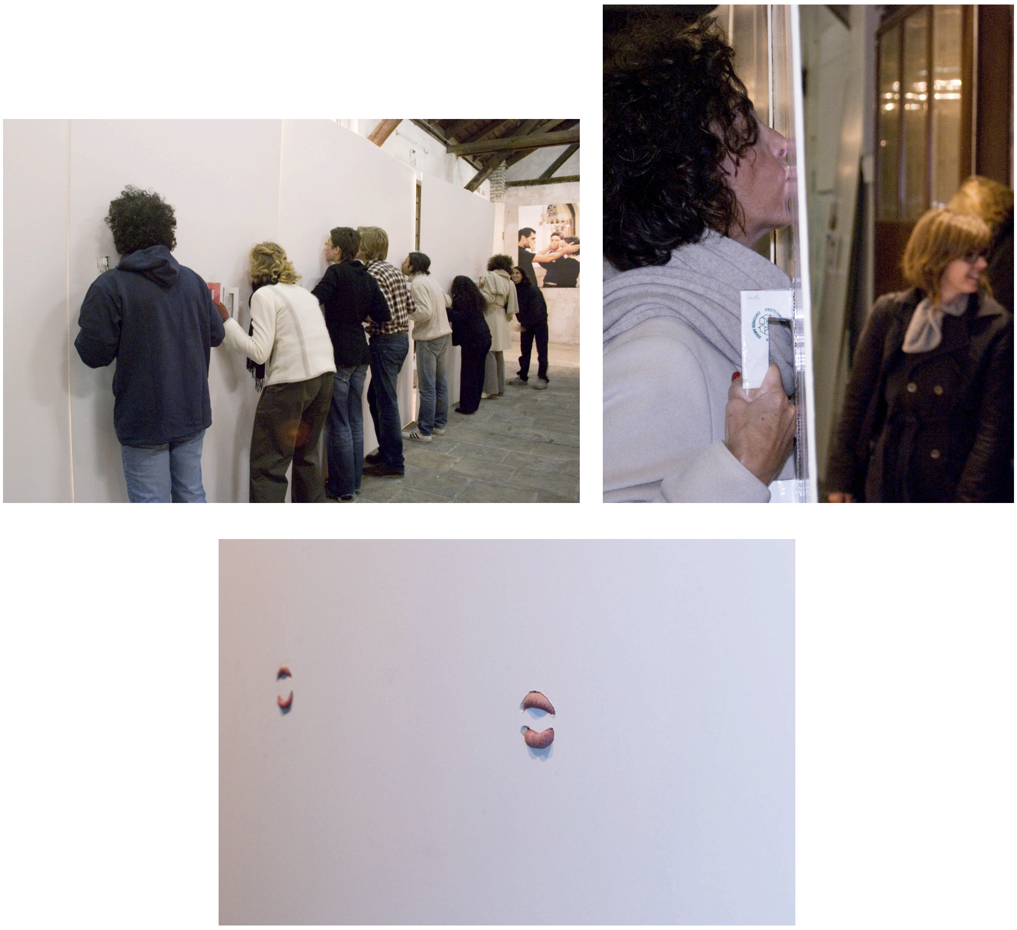

Fig. 66. *A Line, A Word, A Sentence* (2009). Ex Magazzini doganali. Stazione di Bolzano-Bozen, Blzano.
Photos by Christian Fusco

Chapter Five

The Objectification of Language: Language as the Site of Performance in Pearson/Brookes' *Patagonia* (2008)

5.1. Introduction

The previous two case studies suggest in different ways that modes of materiality in dramatic and performative expression are not exclusive to physical objects, environments and human bodies; they extend to include the non-physical elements of a performance, such as the written text and the spoken language. Chapter Three showed how the spoken language in *Satyagraha* is emphasised as a formal element devoid of meaning. It also demonstrated how a performance's written text could be approached as an object of creation and physical negotiation that is open for a multiplicity of interpretations. Yael Davids's performance installations, discussed in Chapter Four, show an interest in voice, language and intonation in addition to the human body and physical objects. The open mouths in *A Line, A Sentence, A Word*, as well as the hidden faces in Davids's other installations, paradoxically draw attention to language, voice and expression by negating them. In the piece presented at the ICA, the interest in language is suggested in the installation's title. The bodies of the performers within that installation are compelled to create a parallel language. They even position themselves in a spatial configuration that is laid out as a score. The 'line' becomes a 'word' then a 'sentence' ('Yael Davids: A Line').

Davids often draws links between the body and language in her work and thoughts, suggesting an exchange of materiality between them. She sees that in the relationship between the body and the object that she establishes in her installations, 'the body becomes a wounded language, […] something that's never really complete' (Personal Interview). Like the body, language too is seen as a sculptural construction. Her recent works demonstrate a gradual shift of interest from the explicit presence of the body in space, to the voice and language in space, where the presence of the subject transforms into voice or spoken language. In the later works *End on Mouth* (2004) and *I Asked Them to Walk* (2005), she created situations where the limits of language and the voice were tested. Performers in these installations were hidden inside large hollow platforms, which were sometimes carried and moved around by other performers. What remained were their disembodied voices and the resonance of their spoken words heard from the outside. Davids's latest work, *Learning to Imitate* (2010), is an ongoing performance lecture that tests the possibility of constructing a three-dimensional score, exploring the relationship between the page and the body. Her aim in this performance is not to use the voice or the language as representational devices, but to negate the moment of presenting a lecture and focus on what lies outside the space of representation (Telephone Interview). Both cases from the works of Improbable and Davids demonstrate that the spoken dramatic language can draw upon modes of materiality that are embodied in the language itself and that manifest themselves in the performance's context and its presentational components.

Jon Erickson argues that language itself has a materiality, and that 'the most truthful and faithful expression one can have has to do with this materiality of language.' He adds that what this materiality of language exactly is has become a matter of highly sceptical debate (137). The concern with the relationship between the linguistic elements of a work of art and its material properties found a field of expression in modernist linguistic models of representation. In an attempt to trace language's objectifying practices, particularly in Western modern poetry, Erickson in

The Fate of the Object identifies what he describes as '*referential objectification*' and '*material objectification*.' The first is a practice of clear description, a common sense pointing to physical features. The second is a structural model of expression resistant to rhetorical appropriation and the reduction of interpretation, which reflects Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'picture theory' that sought to evade one-to-one correspondences on the level of elements (this word for that thing), thus questioning the authority of simple description (Erickson 137-38). Erickson demonstrates through examples of material objectification, such as 'concrete poetry,'[93] that language can present a form of communication based on visual experience and on the performativity of the printed words, which defies the conventional notion of poetry and makes of the poem an object in its own right.

This chapter proposes a way of looking at the objectification of language that is close to Erickson's notion of 'material objectification,' and that is suggested to some extent in the previous case studies. It shares with Erickson's notion, and with the other performance practices mentioned above, a desire to resist direct representation and the reductive effects of singular interpretations. The idea of language's materiality suggested here is evoked by the method adopted in structuring a performance's written text and, consequently, its narrative and the manner of its presentation. The chapter, therefore, focuses on 'language' as a written and a spoken mode of communication that constitutes a performance's written score, emphasising text, sound and voice as material dimensions of this language. Thus, the discussion on the objectification of language in this chapter encompasses, and shifts between, the written text of a performance, its delivery and the narrative emanating from it, as they all exist in an interrelated system of communication.

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[93] Sometimes referred to as 'shape poetry' or 'visual poetry,' concrete poetry is a form in which the typographical arrangement of words is as important in conveying the intended effect as the conventional elements of the poem, such as meaning of words, rhythm, rhyme and so on. The words themselves are often arranged in a way so as to form images and shapes on the page.

As Erickson noted, the materiality of language is a challenging and a heavily debated concept. Proving its validity in theatre and performance discourses is not an easy task, particularly that it is not manifest in the form of spatial or physical constructs that are easily observable, as in the other case studies in this thesis, although the idea of language's materiality constitutes an integral part of their fabric. My perspective on this issue stems from the idea of approaching a text like an object with the capacity of being reshaped and deconstructed to serve particular aesthetic and political aims. The text in this case becomes an element endowed with some of the characteristics and capacities of materials; an element that is mobile and unstable. It draws attention to itself as the primary 'site' of performance that embodies and evokes experiences from the distant past, which is the main argument at the heart of this chapter.

The chapter takes the idea of language's materiality further by looking at the capacity of this performance language to re-articulate past and spatiotemporal experiences, bringing them into the performance field in the present, thus bridging the gap between the verbal and the material; between the past and the present domains. In that case, language and the speaking subject partake in the solidity and presence of things to the extent that enables words to carry the characteristics of things, or as Peter Schwenger openly asserts, 'words *are* things' (23). This ability to materialise experiences and places, embedded in dramatic language, enables 'otherness' (other places, experiences and histories) to be present. Language, therefore, becomes, in a way, *the* site of the experience.

Stanton B. Garner in *Bodied Spaces* argues that dramatic language's ability to conjure up worlds unconstrained by the stage in its actual materiality turns language into 'a form of mise-en-scène in its own right' (139). By this, Garner's statement emphasises the ability of language to mobilise experiences of a place through investing in language's capacity to negotiate the traces of those experiences and places. As he puts it, '[l]anguage "takes place" on the stage, and the transformation it effects on the field of performance—turning this field into an "other world"—is possible because language already constitutes an "other world" itself' (139). In speaking of dramatic language as a form of mise-en-scène, Garner refers to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of language as a sort of 'being' rather than as means, which is a state of being that allows words to present things to us (Garner 139). As quoted by Garner, Merleau-Ponty asserts that,

> [Language's] opaqueness, its obstinate reference to itself, and its turning and folding back upon itself are precisely what make it a mental power; for it in turn becomes something like a universe, and it is capable of lodging things themselves in this universe—after it has transformed them into their meaning. (Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language' 43)

Merleau-Ponty's argument suggests that language has a certain degree of 'autonomy' that enables it to stand for the physical world it indicates. It is why Merleau-Ponty describes language as 'much more like a sort of being than a means,' which allows it to materialise and present things so well (Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language' 43). To a certain extent, this chapter similarly argues that language, in a process of exchange between the verbal and the material, transforms the field of performance into 'other' worlds and other places. In this instance, a shift between 'mimetic' space and 'diegetic' space occurs, calling into the present experiences and places from the past.[94] The space of performance becomes a point of mediation between its own visibility and presence, and the presence of the absent worlds communicated verbally through the dramatic discourse. The performance field with its own physical and material limitations is 'opened up' and expanded by language to embody and recall distant and past experiences and places. Consequently in that case, the spectatorial experience moves back and forth between past and present; presence and absence; the material and the verbal.

The mise-en-scène of the dramatic discourse in Garner's terms, plays a major role in breaking the fixity of the performance 'place' as 'an organised world of meaning' (Tuan 179), displacing it with experiences of other places and landscapes. Yi-Fu Tuan distinguishes between 'space' and 'place' by seeing 'place' as a stable and secure entity, while 'space' is open and unfixed. According to this principle, when a performance takes place inside a building, the fixity and order of that building as a 'place' gives way to the fluidity and openness of the world created by the performance; or the 'space.' This process of mobilising a place by transforming it into space is generated by language and the performance's narrative in addition to the other components of a multiple system of verbal and nonverbal theatrical language. Extending the implications of Tuan's concept, I will argue in this chapter that language in some instances pushes this transformation further, and into another level, by transforming the performance 'space' into a 'place,' but a place that is *other* than the theatre building, creating what I describe as a 'second place' within the space of performance (Fig. 67). That second place, which is evoked by the dramatic text, is flickering and unstable, and the spectator's experience within that process shifts simultaneously between this ‘second’ place, the space of performance and the fixed performance place.

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[94] According to Michael Issacharoff, mimetic space 'is that which is made visible to an audience and represented on stage,' while diegetic space 'is *described*, that is, referred to by the characters. In other words, mimetic space is transmitted directly, while diegetic space is mediated through the discourse of the characters, and thus communicated verbally and not visually' ('Space' 215).

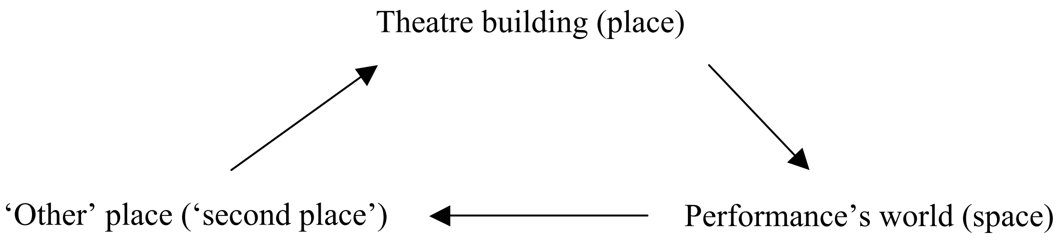

Fig.67

Here, language turns upon itself as Merleau-Ponty argues, becoming the site of performance that is constantly in between the material (mimetic) performance space and also the verbal (diegetic) space. This relationship between language and a place suggests a form of ‘site-specific’ work that has the ability to bring a place into presence without being conditioned by a specific physical location. According to Nick Kaye, site-specificity, with its origins in the minimalist sculpture of the 1960s, can present a challenge to notions of ‘original’ or ‘fixed’ location, problematising the relationship between work and site (*Site-Specific* 2). He argues that site-specific practices, discussed in his book *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (2000), are identified with ‘a *working over* of the production, definition and *performance* of “place”’ (*Site-Specific* 3). Kaye’s emphasis on ‘performance,’ he explains, might be prompted by a reconsideration of the operation of language in relation to location and site. As he puts it, ‘where the location of the signifier may be read as *being performed* by the reader, then the functioning of language provides an initial model for the performance of place’ (*Site-Specific* 3). This suggests that ‘site-specificity’ can be an open and unfixed construct not necessarily tied to a specific physical site. I suggest throughout this chapter that this ‘site’ can be an element that provides a model for the performance of ‘place,’ even if that element is as ephemeral and ‘de-materialised’ as language, voice or sound. Therefore, I will extend Kaye’s thesis by demonstrating that in some forms of dramatic discourse, an absent site can be recalled into presence and identified in the language, the narrative and their modes of delivery. This takes part in challenging the stabilities of site and location and the conventional definitions of site-specificity. It produces a kind of site-specific performance that reconsiders the nature of ‘site’ and the function of language in relation to a place and its locale by releasing the material properties of that language. This method emphasises site, not as static, but as mobile, multiple and complex; always in a process of appearance and disappearance.

5.2. Interrupted Story-‘telling’ as a Mechanism for Rearticulating the Past

Animating an experience of a place through language, as proposed above, calls for forms of performance text and dramaturgy that would reveal to spectators the complex nature of the place or the experience represented. Storytelling provides an example of a performative medium that is primarily based on oral delivery, and that is endowed with an ability to rearticulate experiences and memories, places, things and people. As a dramatic medium, it has the capacity to accommodate and mediate the richness and complexities of human experiences. Walter Benjamin argues that storytelling is not a simple form of orally transmitting stories or a simple report, but as an artistic and cultural medium, storytelling mirrors a mode of processing and reconstituting experience that intimates how experiences pass into and out of memory (Leslie, ‘Traces’ 5-6). Benjamin believes that

> [Storytelling] does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (‘The Storyteller’ 91)

Benjamin proposes storytelling as an existential multilayered process of articulation that carries a multiplicity of experiences and traces of human presence from the past and in the present. The reference to tactility (in traces and handprints) in his quotation above emphasises the existential nature of the act of storytelling and the materiality of the process by which experience is exchanged. At the same time, he believes that the function of storytelling as an expression of the experience of the teller and the listener does not need to necessarily offer direct representation, or to simply describe things. This approach requires a form of narrative that leaves spaces for spectators' participation and for the construction of their own experiences. It is a form of narrative that does not aim to offer a singular reading of history or to necessarily follow hierarchical, authoritative structures of telling.

Benjamin in his writings, in 'The Storyteller' (1936) and elsewhere, shows a concern with finding ways of dealing with past experiences; to relive them, not the way they were, but as strange, uncanny experiences that renew ways of seeing and learning. This is reflected in his approach to writing, particularly the idea of using quotations in writing, or tearing fragments out of their original context and relocating them in new configurations which causes interruption. Graeme Gilloch explains,

> In his notion of interruption, Benjamin perceives, and begins to articulate, an idea which becomes central to his understanding of history and historiography: the fleeting cessation of the dialectical process itself, such that, in the tension created, an image or representation of truth constitutes itself. (156)

The function of quotations for Benjamin is not to verify or document thoughts as in most common uses of them. Hannah Arendt notes that when Benjamin was working on his study of German tragedy he accumulated a collection of hundreds of quotations arranged systematically. The collection of quotations was not intended to facilitate the writing, but it constituted the main work, with his own writing coming secondary to it. The main body of the work consisted of tearing literary fragments out of their contexts and rearranging them afresh in a sort of 'surrealistic montage' (Arendt 51). Additionally, in his major incomplete project on the Arcades of nineteenth-century Paris, *Passagen-Werk,* commodities, architecture, fashion, mass media, street life, engineering, photography, and others are brought together in a disconnected, fragmented construction with neither a formal narrative nor an analytic structure. On the methodology of this project, Benjamin states, '[m]ethod of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse - these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them' (qtd. in Leslie, 'Walter Benjamin's'). The aim of this method is to 'reawaken' history, as he writes, '[t]he new, dialectical method of doing history teaches us to pass in spirit—with the rapidity and intensity of dreams—through what has been, in order to experience the present as a waking world, a world to which every dream at last refers' (qtd. in Leslie, 'Walter Benjamin's'). The fragmented, distinct moments that are removed from their original context to be reconceptualised in new configurations cause interruption and a stimulus to thought, as Benjamin puts it, '[q]uotations in my work are like wayside robbers who leap out armed and relieve the stroller of his conviction' ('One-Way' 95).

Arendt argues that Benjamin's discovery of the modern function of quotations was born out of despair of the present and the desire to destroy it; hence their power is 'not the strength to preserve but to cleanse, to tear out of context, to destroy' (Benjamin qtd. in Arendt 43). He argued that the destructive power of quotations was 'the only one which still contains the hope that something from this period will survive – for no other reason than that it was torn out of it' (Benjamin qtd. in Arendt 43).[95] Thus for Benjamin, 'the transmissibility of the past had been replaced by its citability' (Arendt 43). This approach to text, as a form of textual collage, Michael Shanks explains, aims to

> construct something new out of old, to connect what may appear dissimilar in order to achieve new insights and understanding. [...] The interruption of illusion and distraction by collage sets off allusions through the juxtaposed, montaged elements. So the new understanding comes through contaminated representation rather than pure reference to the depicted subject matter. (189)

Interruption in writing and the discourse of storytelling, as introduced by Benjamin, are linked. They share the urge to mobilise experiences in ways that go beyond direct representation, and that disturb the authority and fixity of a singular dominating narrative. They can both present a form of 'language mise-en-scène,' or, as Merleau-Ponty argues, the dramatic discourse in this case reveals its own existence as 'being;' as a fluid, live entity that is embodied with the experiences, places and worlds it evokes to spectators. Therefore, in demonstrating the main argument in this chapter, I will identify a mode of a performance text that negotiates the faculties of both methods as part of its mechanisms of presentation: storytelling and interruption, which emphasises the performance's dramatic discourse as an object to be reshaped and recreated. However, the focus is not on traditional forms of storytelling as the one advocated by Benjamin in his article 'The Storyteller,' but I am seeing it as a medium constructed in a synthesis of narrative debris and traces of the past, and produced in a form that defies systematisation and resists closure, which is why it is referred to as 'telling,' because it is not necessarily conditioned by a linear 'story' in the conventional sense.

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[95] Benjamin's quotations above cited by Arendt in her article are from his volumes *Schriften* I and II (1955).

Therefore, the following stems from my understanding of Benjamin's use of quotations, or narrative discontinuity, as a way of regaining insights into history, which is applied to 'telling' as a performative model. I will look at the objectification implied in the act of telling as a way of looking back and gaining access to past experiences, particularly of a specific place and its locale. I will highlight the implications of combining the two methods of rearticulating an historical narrative proposed by Benjamin. For the combination of telling and interruption inevitably produce an alienating experience, as Benjamin himself was aware,[96] which plays part in evoking and questioning a sense of an experience, while also negating that experience through the dynamics of estrangement and defamiliarisation.

I will touch below on the capacity of 'interruption,' as understood by Benjamin in his use of quotations in writing, and also by drawing on the work of Michael Shanks and Mike Pearson in their joint publication *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001). This publication, which combines perspectives from the worlds of performance and material culture, suggests useful outlooks on the wider question of materiality in the performance field. The book chronicles the development of a long-term collaboration between a performance practitioner (Pearson) and an archaeological thinker (Shanks). The joint result attempts to bridge the gap between two different disciplines in a collaborative format, producing a convergence of the theories and practices of archaeology and performance, or what they term as a

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[96] Hannah Arendt argues that Benjamin was aware that his method of using and collecting quotations is bound to cause certain obscurities for the reader, but what mattered to him above all was to avoid evocations of empathy and to allow the intrinsic meaning in language to speak for itself (Arendt 52).

'blurred genre' that comprises a mixture of narration and scientific practices, and an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to recording, writing and illustrating the material past (*Theatre/Archaeology* xi). The work suggests a way of looking at the nature of performance, knowledge of the past and our connection to the material presence of that past. One of its central questions is the ability of theatre and performance to generate experiential knowledge of sites and artefacts through the retrieval of material fragments, which responds to the issue raised in this chapter. Additionally, the case study analysed in this chapter is partly devised by Mike Pearson, therefore, *Theatre/Archaeology* aids in illuminating some of the impulses behind the creation of the performance explored.

The following part starts by introducing some of the key questions raised in *Theatre/Archaeology* and in the practice of Brith Gof company that feed into the main argument of this chapter. It then moves to its core case study, which provides a practical demonstration of its argument and a platform to test its implications. Finally, the chapter closes with a proposition of an 'alternative' form of site-specificity that is entirely grounded on the verbal and the aural when all forms of physical presence are eliminated from the field of performance.

5.3. Theatre/Archaeology: Between the Past and the Present

Michael Shanks and Mike Pearson propose methodological models for approaching issues of performance and documentation, as well as new ways of investigating place and landscape, notions of physicality, site and encounter. The authors see performance and archaeology as methodological constructs jointly active in mobilising the past, 'in making creative use of [the past's] various fragments in forging cultural memory out of varied interests and remains,' which necessitates different ways of telling that can incorporate different orders of narrative (*Theatre/Archaeology* 131). Their thesis proposes a model of performance that carries resonances of Benjamin’s approach to writing and history presented above and that combines the mechanisms of storytelling as well as quotation. They too consider storytelling as a practice that helps constitute a sense of place, not necessarily through direct representation. Echoing Benjamin’s use of quotation, the performative strategies they present in *Theatre/Archaeology* suggest that language and the narrative of storytelling can provide effective means for rearticulating sites and landscapes through a high order of intertextuality. On the solo narrative, for example, the authors argue that it can present ‘dialogue between texts: anecdotes, analects, autobiography, the description of people, places and pathologies, poetry, forensic data, quotations, lies, memories, jokes. Indeed, it must vacillate between the intimately familiar and the infinitely strange, if the visitor’s attention is to be held’ (*Theatre/Archaeology* 159).

The fragmentary construction of the narrative of storytelling and its conflicting registers proposed by the authors carry links to the montage of textual fragments that Benjamin saw as a way to deal with the past in response to the break in tradition that occurred in his lifetime, as Arendt argues. The operations of storytelling were understood by Benjamin as a craft; as a network of labour and practiced experiences. According to Benjamin ‘[t]he storyteller takes what he tells from experience, his own or others, and makes it the experience of those hearing the tale’ (Leslie, ‘Traces’ 6), which occurs in a process of weaving the past and the present experiences to provide a model of ‘authentic experience’ as he believes. He conceives texts and memory as material; as woven, which is part of his most literally understood materialism (Leslie, 'Traces' 7). Stories, therefore, become crafted objects; textual and textured.

Similarly, Pearson and Shanks propose approaching a place like an archaeological construct; excavating its material traces and rearticulating them in the present by creating a network of connections and references, weaving fragments of moments, experiences and narratives, or what they term as a 'deep map.' According to the authors,

> the deep map attempts to record and represent the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the factual and the fictional, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral history, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about a place. (*Theatre/Archaeology* 64-65)

The idea of 'craft' here is resonant, highlighting the materiality of the process by which the depth of place is addressed and brought to life through processing memories and experiences. By developing a non-representational form, such work of storytelling 'tells its tale through elaborate scene-cutting and dramatic emphasis of event, through reiteration and non sequitur, via cul-de-sac and wormhole in its fabric,' asserts Pearson (*In Comes* 17). In other words, what connects the propositions suggested by Benjamin and Pearson and Shanks is that storytelling becomes an active agent in its engagement with place, while responding to the complexity and multiplicity of meanings attached to it, which occurs in a form of narrative interspersed by moments of interruption.

5.3.1. Performance as a 'Hybrid' Practice

Interrupting the autonomy of representation is at the heart of Pearson and Shanks' proposal; that an experience of a place is not necessarily tied to notions of 'authentic' representation, but it is evoked through the creation of a non-linear narrative, constructed out of conflicting fragments and traces of events and experiences that evoke an image of the past. The aim is not to try to recover the past, but to understand it as a mobile experience with embodied tensions and fluidities. This fractured structure of narrative is sometimes referred to by the authors as a 'performance hybrid' (*Theatre/Archaeology* 109), which indicates the heterogeneous nature of a performance practice that does not claim notions of authenticity of representation, but attempts to create a counter-discourse on past experiences. The dialectical nature of montage is manifest in how Pearson articulates his understanding of the monologue of the storyteller as that which can exhibit a dialogue between texts, encompassing 'the fragmentary, the digressive, the ambiguous, the appropriated, in juxtaposition and in contradiction' ('From Memory' 79).

Even the earlier site-specific work created by the Wales-based performance company Brith Gof, of which Pearson was a co-founder between 1981 and 1997, demonstrates an affinity with the notion of hybrid practice and its dialectical disposition.[97] According to Nick Kaye, the company's site-specific work sought to provoke a series of dialogues and confrontations between performance and location, exploring unresolved relationships rather than creating linear structures. Their approaches to site moved beyond illustration, operating within architectures not as backdrops. Consequently, their audiences were often confronted with various interpenetrating narratives and voices, and were invited to encounter the site in which these works were realised as reframed and overlaid by narratives, which challenged and drew on the place of their presentation. The guiding metaphor for the construction of Brith Gof's work in these places was the coexistence of distinct architectures inhabiting one another and the site itself without resolution into a synthetic whole. It is a process that activates narratives through the continuous exchange between site and performance (Kaye, *Site-Specific* 53). This is confirmed by Pearson who asserts that site-specific performances '**recontextualise** site. [...] [They] are a complex overlay of **narrative**, historical and contemporary, a kind of **saturated space**, or a scene of crime, where [...] "everything is potentially important"' (qtd. in Kaye, *Art* 214).

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[97] Brith Gof was founded in 1981 by Mike Pearson and Lis Hughes Jones. The company purposefully operated outside of the prevailing theatrical orthodoxies of the time, creating their own circumstances for performance and relating their work to specific locations and occasions in West Wales. In these circumstances, their work became increasingly political, drawing on aspects of Welsh history and addressing experiences of cultural and economic decline and disintegration. The company's work extended across large-scale, site-specific performances, touring theatre performances, installation, video, television and music (Kaye, *Art* 209). The company was disbanded in 1997.

These disruptive dynamics of approaching sites move beyond illustration to challenging readings of place and location, opening them up for multiple readings. These dynamics also condition, not only Brith Gof's site-specific work, but also the whole of the company's practice—including storytelling—in its forms, preoccupations, themes and placement. Pearson describes his theatre practice as 'fractured, problematic, unauthentic,' which leads to performance that can follow agendas of 'cultural intervention and stimulation as opposed to reflection and representation.' A performance practice that can provide a forum for challenging and changing of identities while remaining a theatre of distinct identity that speaks of, and for, a distinct identity ('The Dream' 5).

In spite of the productive and creative aspects of utilising this approach to narrative, forms of borrowing and condensed fragmentation inherent in it disrupt a narrative integrity, and destabilises senses of continuity and coherence. This can be particularly problematic when engaging with specific cultural and historical concerns, in this case, of a Welsh audiences; the primary focus of Brith Gof's work.

Frustrating expectations for direct referential meaning is a productive theatrical strategy for encouraging an active mode of spectatorship, as understood by Brecht as well as Benjamin. But it also runs the risk of alienating an audience from their own cultural constructs, thus jeopardising the audience's agency if the fragmentation is not carefully considered. Lis Hughes Jones, one of the co-founders of Brith Gof company, asserts that this form of work, evident in previous Brith Gof performances, created distance from Welsh audiences, but it also generated a capacity for questioning and problematising. And as the only Welsh presence at the core of the company, she was caught between, on one hand, an engagement with a mode of questioning and distanced enquiry, and on another hand, an impulse to respond to a desire for closeness to the Welsh community, which she achieved in her independent solo works that are based on traditional storytelling (Interview).

On the other hand, Erickson argues that even fragmented poetic discourse may carry a narrative within its disjointed pieces. As he puts it, 'through a difficult attempt at comprehending history, an entire life might be rendered as a vortex, a dynamic allegory condensed into a symbol' (181). It is what Schwenger also refers to as the narrative of the collection, which is a silent discourse embodied in the diverse, incoherent items of a collection; 'the many possible similarities and differences set up by their juxtaposition, the variations on the prevailing theme, the inchoate narratives that shimmer around them' (84). This analogy of the collection is suggested in the underlying dynamic of Brith Gof and Pearson's work with a performance's narrative. The discourse of the collection might indeed be self-contained and alienating, but it provokes a complication that defies instant scrutiny useful to question habitual perceptions and given norms. The productive potentials, as well as the problems inherent in this form of narrative construction will be examined by looking at a recent performance that negotiates a significant moment from the Welsh history. The performance aims to critically interrogate and negate notions of authenticity and 'purity' of representation in relation to that specific history. I will assess the extent to which the dialectical nature of the fractured narrative of that performance allows the tension and contradiction inherent in human experiences to be evoked.[98] The analysis of this performance will also highlight the idea of language as the 'site' of performance proposed at the beginning of this chapter.

5.4. *Patagonia*: In the Past and the Present

The repertoires of Brith Gof and, later Pearson/Brookes,[99] include several 'tellings' and solo performances that provide examples of the creation of a 'deep map' as a way of evoking a sense of place. The following case study from the work of Pearson/Brookes is *Welsh Landscapes (Tellings)*; a double-bill of performances recovered from the archives of Brith Gof and Pearson/Brookes. It consists of a reworked version of *Patagonia*; a touring Brith Gof production, premiered in 1992 in Taliesin Arts Centre in Swansea, Wales. The other performance in that double-bill is *Dead Men's Shoes*; a Pearson/Brookes collaboration and a solo performance for Pearson. It was first performed in 1997 at the Welsh Industrial Maritime Museum in Cardiff, Wales. The version of *Welsh Landscapes (Tellings)* that I attended was performed in November 2008 in Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff. Each of the two texts evokes significant moments from the early twentieth century that are embedded in the Welsh collective memory. *Patagonia* is based on the complex issue of the Welsh immigration to Patagonia in Southern Argentina, focusing on the story of the murder of a prominent figure of the Welsh community there by two gunmen in 1909. *Dead Men's Shoes* looks at Robert Falcon Scott's fateful expedition to the South Pole in 1912, spoken through an examination of the role and fate of Welsh seaman Edgar Evans who was on that expedition.

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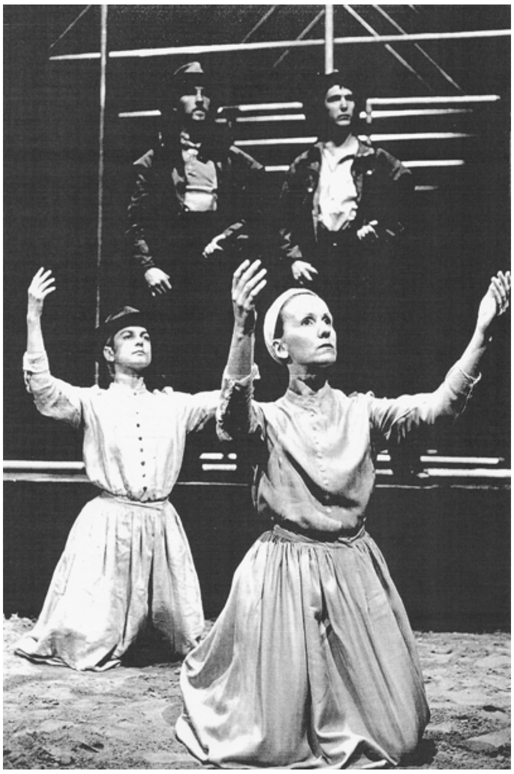
[98] Unlike the previous two cases, I approached this case study as an outside observer, rather than as a participant-observer. Much if the work's significance for my analysis lies in the performance's impact on me as a receiver, rather than as a participant.

[99] Pearson/Brookes is an on-going long-term collaboration between Mike Brookes and Mike Pearson since 1997. They met in Cardiff, and first worked together on Brith Gof's *Gododdin* in 1988. Their performance and theoretical work have engaged a diversity of media and disciplines, primarily concerned with the pursuit of experimental strategies within the form, function and placement of performance. The artists consider their practice as that which constitutes performance as social enquiry and action rather than as 'simple artistic reflection' (*Pearson/Brookes*).

The focus of the analysis below is on *Patagonia* as a performance that particularly employs a complex and multilayered construction of narrative and ways of telling that defy easy access. By looking at the performance's historical context, the construction of its text (combining modes of telling with interruption), the evoked narrative, the manner of its delivery, and the material conditions of the performance, the chapter examines the performance's capacity to destabilise the notion of historical and cultural 'authenticity' and to question the stability of history. The performance provides a demonstration of the argument proposed regarding the embedded materiality of language and its capacity to function as the 'site' of performance where the past finds a platform in the present conditions of performance. The fact that the performance is based on a culturally specific moment from Welsh history that is embedded in a collective memory adds to its pertinence as a case study, as well as emphasising the complexity of the idea of a narrative's discontinuity.

Patagonia, which is written by Pearson, was originally produced in 1992 as a full production for a proscenium-arch auditorium and for five performers; Lis Hughes Jones, Eddie Ladd, Richard Lynch, Marc Rees and Mike Pearson. The performers in that production appear dressed in late nineteenth-century costumes, with Pearson present as a commentator/narrator/director sitting facing the stage below the apron. The text was delivered in both the English and the Welsh languages, using a variety of performance modes; from hymn-singing to storytelling; from rhetoric using a microphone to choreographed enactment; from mimetic reconstruction to direct address to the audience; constantly stepping in and out of character. In varying combinations, performers presented a simultaneity of different activities on different areas of the stage. The performance was divided into nine sections, each beginning and ending with a still tableau. Before each section, two large, suspended light boxes, facing the cyclorama, passed horizontally across the stage as if 'scanning' the scene, so the still tableaus appear in silhouette. A sophisticated sound and amplification system distributed performers' voices within the auditorium, creating a sonic architecture that aimed to draw performers and audiences closer, and to remove performers' need to 'project' their voices.



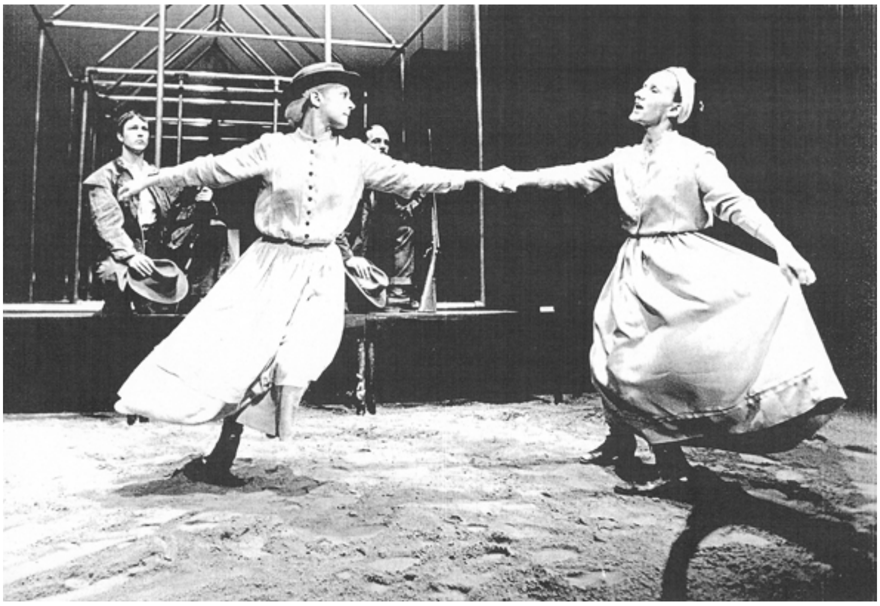


Fig. 68. *Patagonia* (1992). Royal Court Theatre, London. Photos by Alastair Muir.
The V&A Theatre and Performance Collections Archive.

All of these elements were mixed and juxtaposed in a form of cinematic montage emphasised by a cinemascopic, wide stage frame informed by Clifford McLucas' set, John Hardy's soundtrack that resembled a film score, and by how the focus of activity and scenes moved from left to right, in addition to using acting conventions from early silent films (Pearson, 'The Dream' 9-10). The programme notes of that production state that to present that 'great Welsh adventure' that occurred in a land so vast, and a history stretching back to 1865, one way would be to '[u]se the acting techniques of the earliest silent films (1903-08), the tones of radio plays (removing the need for performers to "project"), the concepts of "magic realism" used by South American authors. And then draw back to reveal wider panoramas' (*Brith Gof Patagonia*). A review of the production at the Royal Court in London in May 1992 describes

> Nine short sequences in dumbshow, performed with the sweeping arm-movements and other broad gestures of the silent film, are intercut with longer sung or spoken passages, in Welsh and English, each played in a different style: narration, mini-drama, recitation of

> facts, exhortations, anthropological parody and so forth. [...] In these sequences the actors cleverly capture the early-movie style, and a story of sorts emerges. (Kingston)

Another review of the same production describes it as

> a mobile cinematic evocation of the Welsh experience in Argentina. [...] The stage is used like a cinemascope screen, the miked actors' voices are disconcertingly thrown around the auditorium and the actors themselves are in perpetual motion providing no still focal point but rather, like those early films, providing no set hierarchy of information. (Christopher)

The reworked version in 2008 took a radically different approach, reducing the physically and aurally complex staging into the bare minimum, but at the same time, it was carefully executed. Even the story of Patagonia itself was 'minimised' as I will demonstrate below. The performance was presented as a 'rehearsed reading' delivered only verbally by three performers from the original cast (Jones, Rees and Pearson) standing in their everyday dress in front of basic microphones placed in fixed positions in the performance space. All of the other physical, spatial, auditory and visual elements in the earlier production were completely removed. The performance space itself, or *Y Llofft* 'The Loft,' in Chapter Arts Centre is an intimate, and aging found space that went through a diverse history of usage; from a room in a school building to a studio space for the South Wales Art Society, to a rehearsal studio, then finally as a space that lacks the formal architectural elements of a conventional performance space. It has also been part of Pearson's history as a performance practitioner, as he explains, for he performed several activities in that space before it was tidied up and prepared for performance (Pearson, Interview).

At the time of the performance, The Loft was used temporarily as a makeshift performance space while the main venue was being refurbished. With no access for the disabled, it could only be reached by a steep and narrow external staircase with uneven rugged steps. The walls of the space itself were left rough and unpolished. Lights were fixed around columns, focusing on them rather than pointing to the space itself. The lack of authoritative features endowed the place with fluidity, as opposed to the defined characteristics of a proscenium theatre. Pearson notes that ‘it had a kind of formal informality about it, which was not bad. It didn’t look like it had a front and a back and what have you, and we could lay the wires anywhere’ (Interview). The Loft was not emphasised as representational, but as a space in-between. It highlighted the ephemerality and transformability of the dramatic event and acted as an open receptor to the worlds and places the performance brought to life. The spoken text in such space evoked images of the Patagonian landscapes, transforming the space into a ‘second place’ as I proposed above after Yi-Fu Tuan’s concepts of space and place.

Before the start of the performance, chairs were stacked up against the walls, inviting the audience to place them informally anywhere in the space. This action marked the beginning of a journey; an attempt at mapping a place from the distant past, and the audience were free to identify their places at any point along that journey. On one night, audiences arranged the chairs in a circle around the performers, creating an intimate space. Performers were waiting for audience members, talking with them casually as they arrived. All the other stage elements were exposed; the sound operator in a corner, wires spread on the floor, coiling around audience’s feet, and lighting units fixed around the columns. The close proximity between performance, performers and audiences was not prearranged or deliberate. There was no pretence in the production of being something other than what it was; there was no sense of illusion. The performance displayed an awareness of its own mode of production. The formality and theatricality of the first staging as described above were evidently absent. What primarily remained at its centre was the performers' presence, their delivery and the score, this time delivered only in the English language, in addition to displaying images of Patagonian landscapes taken during the company's visit to Patagonia projected on a screen mounted on one wall.

The main emphasis shifted to the oral text, the language and the minimal stage elements as the performance's mise-en-scène that evoked what was previously complemented by complex stagecraft. The spoken text filled the space with vivid clarity and sharpness in spite of the seemingly simple technology employed by collaborator Mike Brookes, which emphasised the density and the importance of the delivered text. Pearson explains,

> we feel very confident with those kinds of simple technologies, which actually to make them work is rather difficult. Mike [Brookes] is extremely good at placing spoken text in a room, just to amplify it enough to get it into the room, which is quite subtle but it's something we worked hard on in various pieces. (Interview)

The text attained a kind of materiality, becoming an 'entity' in its own right. Thus the work became clearly about evoking a sense of the landscape and the experience of a place through the verbal delivery (Pearson, Interview), rather than through an all-encompassing stage spectacle.

Pearson thinks that *Welsh Landscapes (Tellings)* as it was presented in 2008 should have been part of an archival project that aims at recovering some of Brith Gof's devised work in different formats of documentation other than the conventional mediums of distributing devised performance (such as audio or video recordings). This is part of an ongoing concern for Pearson regarding issues of documentation, archiving, survival and the distribution of dramatic material that are generated through different kinds of devising processes. Therefore, he considers *Welsh Landscapes* as a 'reading,' in addition to a chance to revisit an early text, to see how its parts would ‘sound’ in public again, and a chance to work with previous collaborators (Interview).[100] However, as an audience member, the performance offered me more than a basic ‘reading.’ As another audience member commented, the performance seemed dramaturgically self-contained, sustained by a sense of internal theatrical logic in spite of its seeming simplicity. The performance appeared theatrically deeper and more satisfying for a spectator than a conventional reading.[101] Lis Hughes Jones agrees that it was more than a rehearsed reading for her. Especially since the work was not new to her, the text still carried the dynamic and the actions of the original performance. Jones, who in the later performance spoke parts of the text that were either delivered by her or by other performers in the original production, could still think of her own actions and the actions of the other performers from the past while delivering her lines in the recent production (Jones, Interview).[102] Therefore, the physicality of the performance from the past was embodied in the one in the present.

Patagonia demonstrates a form of materiality embedded in the narrative when other material elements are absent; the function of the mise-en-scène shifts from the physical and spatial components of the stage to the language, as in Garner’s argument. In addition to the embodied materiality of the performance in *Patagonia*, the fragmented and disjointed structure of the narrative itself and its delivery evoked the experience of dislocation and the sense of otherness inherent in the Welsh Patagonian phenomenon. In the following section, I will put the performance of

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[100] Pearson also adds that during its refurbishments, Chapter Arts Centre was interested in presenting small events and ‘readings,’ thus he saw this as a useful opportunity to revisit *Patagonia* in that format (Interview).

[101] I am indebted to Gareth Evans for his insightful comments and observations.

[102] For example, Jones in the latest production delivered the part on the ‘arrowhead,’ which will be described below, and that was originally performed by Richard Lynch in *Patagonia* in 1992. For the rest of the text, though, the collaborators could not necessarily remember exactly who performed which part of the text in the earlier production, so this aspect did not inform the devising of the later performance (Jones, Interview).

Patagonia in its wider historical context, demonstrating how the latest production in 2008 mobilised dynamics of presentation in ways that served to evoke a sense of the place and the otherness and dislocation embedded in that historical experience.

5.4.1. *Patagonia*: An Experience of 'Otherness'

Patagonia expresses the experiences of emigration and immigration of early Welsh settlement in Argentinean Patagonia that began in the mid-nineteenth century. For in 1865, a group of Welsh settlers landed on the shores of Puerto Madryn seeking political, religious and linguistic independence. The Welsh movement to Patagonia, according to Glyn Williams, was initially a move to plant within this region a self-governing unit of Welsh culture. It is where members of the colony would be free to govern themselves as an independent nation, practicing the religion of their choice in their own language (*The Desert* 184). Their initial dream was to create a 'new Wales' or a self-sustained colony in a far enough place where people did not have to assimilate into non-Welsh societies, and where they could preserve their identity as non-conformist Welsh-speakers. However, the project of cultural autonomy, and the idyllic image visualised by the early supporters of the movement, soon failed; they were threatened by the conditions of migration and dislocation. The initial single narrative opened up to include a multiplicity of trajectories when the Welsh and the Argentinean cultures merged in a vivid case of cultural hybridisation in spite of the many attempts to resist assimilation. Williams explains that the greatest fear of the Welsh was of being 'swamped' by the Spanish-speaking population. Although they could preserve their cultural values, based primarily upon language and religion in the chapel and the Eisteddfod,[103] in many phases of life they were face to face with another language and a new set of cultural values. Although the language of the home and of worship was Welsh, schooling was, by law passed in 1896, in Spanish, which played an important role in the life of the children; they began to live a dual role (*The Desert* 185).

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[103] A national Welsh festival of poetry, music and performance that dates back to approximately the twelfth century. Welsh academic and historian, Hywel Teifi Edwards, argues that the National Eisteddfod dates (at least) from 1176, while the year 1789 marked the beginning of the modern

On various other levels, elements from each culture were added to the other causing change in many aspects of the Welsh people's social and cultural lives. This integration was further conditioned by the natural characteristics of the new environment, as Williams puts it, 'the nature of the settlement pattern [in the Lower Chubut Valley] is a combination of the cultural style of its creators and the nature of their specific adaptation to the environment' (*The Dream* 83).[104] The two cultures became strangely fused together, while much of the early Welsh culture remained intact (Christopher). Travel writer, Bruce Chatwin, describes the Welsh colony in Patagonia, which he visited in 1974-75, as follows,

> The Welsh are still there. The Eisteddfod is still sung in St David's Hall in Trelew, and around the village of Gaiman there are farms that take you back to the simple agricultural world of Parson Kilvert.[105] It is a little strange for an Englishman to have to speak Spanish to a Mr Jones or a Mr Griffiths. (25)

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eisteddfod and its development as a popular institution (1, 3). The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed an explosion of eisteddfod activity at local, regional and national levels, that it came to dominate the Welsh cultural scene during the Victorian heyday, offering a popular means of self-expression (Edwards 2). Edwards explains that the noun 'eistedd' (to sit) literally means a 'sitting together;' a competitive session of bards and minstrels that aims at exercising and advancing their crafts in the presence of a distinguished patron. He speculates that this oral tradition must have evolved within the bardic system that fostered a tradition of praise poetry long before 1176 (4). He refers to a story that tells of a six-century eisteddfod held in Conway at the royal behest of Maelgwn Gwynedd (1).

[104] Williams gives an example of the house types and the materials used in building them. By 1870, over half the houses were of brick, but burnt bricks were still scarce in the valley, most being made of sun-dried clay which had been dug out of the river banks. The remaining houses were mainly of willow poles overlaid with a mixture of mud and grass and occasionally gravel. Such mixture dried readily in the sun, and scarcity of rain ensured its survival (*The Desert* 83).

[105] Trelew and Gaiman are towns in the province of Chubut in Argentinean Patagonia in which Welsh-Argentineans are concentrated.

The unusual signs of the cultural integration and its implications on the construction of people's identities, still evident in the present day, are expressed in a comment from a review of *Patagonia* that states that Welsh settlers 'became gauchos and conquistadores,' at the same time, they built chapels, sang hymns, held eisteddfodau, spoke a Welsh language [of the mid-nineteenth century] fused with Spanish, and turned their experience into a source of Celtic myth (Billington).

Members of Brith Gof company visited the Welsh community in Patagonia in 1986 where they experienced 'Wales on its head' as Jones commented (Pearson, Interview). They were struck by how '[t]he Welsh Eisteddfod is there with the familiar forms of composition, but in Spanish. The poems are about Gauchos, not sheep farmers. A hymn can easily turn into a tango or passa doble' (Jones qtd. in Hughes 12). Even the natural features of the landscape changed. The early Welsh settlers found ways of irrigating the Chubut valley in South Argentina, therefore, vast stretches of fertile land grew in the middle of the desert creating Argentina's most fertile wheat lands; history became inscribed on the physical surface of the landscape. Pearson suggests that to Welsh visitors' eyes, in Patagonia 'everything seems intimately familiar and yet infinitely strange: parrots swoop over the chapel, cowboys speak Welsh (a Welsh of the nineteenth century), people sing the hymns of Pantycelyn and dance the *paso doble*. A dizzying image: part Victorian survival, part mirage, part theme park' ('The Dream' 7). Welsh Patagonia became a place that escapes cohesiveness, problematising and redefining the relationship to place in forms that the performance tried to negotiate in both its form and content. Affected by the strange experience of otherness in Patagonia, Brith Gof company members chose to present a performance that challenges traditional readings of the Patagonia experience. Rather than offering a singular viewpoint, a simple homage to Patagonia, or a celebration of the achievements of the Welsh pioneers, they made an attempt to respond to the hybrid nature of the place that is a result of the Welsh diaspora, thus interrogating the significance of location and dislocation.

The passionate ambition of the first settlers and their struggle to carve out a life for themselves amongst miles of barren landscape, which forced them to adapt their skills to turn the land into a resourceful place, turned the experience of the Welsh settlers into a sort of myth, often romanticised in popular discourse on the settlement. For example, in a documentary titled *The Desert and the Dream* (1963) that shows life in the Welsh colony in Patagonia, commentator Hywel Davies declares that 'the Welsh opened up Patagonia' (*The Desert*). Not to mention how the biblical imagery implied in the documentary's title hints at the religious connotation given to that experience. Glyn Williams explains that

> Within what has been published [about the settlement in Patagonia] there has been a tendency to romanticize the entire venture. This trend has been associated with the discourse of those who founded the settlement and who saw it as a refuge from cultural and economic oppression in Wales; with the heroics of pioneer life; with the relative success of the settlers and their descendants in conserving features of Welsh culture which were/are under threat in the homeland. (*The Welsh* ix)

The romantisisation was countered by an undercurrent of awareness of an act of colonisation that has not been fully acknowledged. Interested in de-mythologising the Welsh emigrants' way of life, challenging the orthodoxy surrounding the experience, and commenting on a colonised minorities turning into colonisers, *Patagonia* offered to present 'the disorientation of a displaced culture and some idea of what those early settlers must have felt in this bleak region' (Pearson qtd. in Christopher); a region that did not turn out to be 'just like Wales' as the Welsh people were promised (Pearson, Interview). They did not expect to be walking into such a harsh desert. Thus Brith Gof intended to capture those experiences in a story, using a narrative that does not follow a linear structure or that projects a homogeneous discourse. After all, people's experiences and lives in Patagonia proved the impossibility of homogeneity and the failure of arriving at a singular story, and the narrative in *Patagonia* was utilised as a way of capturing those experiences from the past and re-presenting them to the contemporary audience in the present. In *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* (1994), archaeologist Christopher Tilley proposes narrative as

> a means of linking locales, landscapes, actions, events and experiences together providing a synthesis of heterogeneous phenomena. In its simplest form it involves a story and a story-teller. In its mimetic or phenomenological form narrative seeks to capture action not just through description but as a form of re-description. (*A Phenomenology* 32)

Patagonia, therefore, follows Tilley's understanding of the 'phenomenological' form of narrative. Rather than providing a mere description, or a simple succession of events, through the deconstruction of events and the fragmentation of narrative, the performance of *Patagonia* tried to challenge pretentions to closure of text and to capture the dynamics of an experience in a form of 're-description,' to use Tilley's term, or 'rearticulation.' In other words, by paying attention to how the story is creatively constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed, a critical approach to understanding phenomena is evoked, and a sense of movement is implied. Tilley continues by arguing that stories 'are part of a human labour that transforms an abstract homogeneous space into place [...] Spatial stories are about the operations and practices which constitute places and locales' (*A Phenomenology* 32). This echoes Benjamin's approach to storytelling as a practiced labour that weaves instances from the past and the present to evoke a sense of 'true experience' of that past. It also links to my proposal of the transformation of 'space' into 'place,' which is a process that is generated during the act of telling. The performance of *Patagonia* opens up its space into a distant landscape beyond the material and temporal confines of The Loft, not by describing or representing that landscape, but by weaving narrative fragments and re-describing past moments.[106]

The score when I attended the performance in 2008 consisted of a combination of fragments and voices of different registers and a diversity of narrative styles; unearthed moments, objects and memories derived from various archival and non-archival sources on Welsh Patagonia. These included a radio play, monologues, hymns, lists, field recordings, extracts from imaginary guide books, eye witness accounts, descriptions of events, lies, imagined stories, locales, artefacts and photographs, put together in a non-linear structure and without privileging one source over the other. During the performance, things, moments and stories continued appearing and suddenly disappearing. Names and characters were not given; local events, places and tales were not contextualised; quotations and voices were not cited, often 'telling' on behalf of someone else, in the voice of someone else; there was a sense of not claiming history.

Dividing the text democratically between three different voices in different genders and accents resisted characterisation and added to the openness and complexity of the narrative's structure. I was surrounded by voices alternately pulling my attention into three different directions, but not towards one specific voice. On the screen, images of Patagonian landscapes complemented, and also contradicted, the text being delivered. For instance, an image of an open bare landscape would accompany a description of old photographs; the projected images did not function as direct signifiers. The performance approached the Patagonia experience like an archaeological construct; excavating its material, archival traces and rearticulating them, creating a deep network of connections and references. The examples below from the text, as it was presented in 2008, show how the disconnected blocks of text were placed together.

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[106] *Patagonia*, Pearson's first attempt at non-narrative writing, was, in a way, a response to the artist's awareness of the inherent problems of representations of landscape. Popular Western iconographic representations of landscape force a dualism between object and subject, meaning and substance, which does not serve or respond to the conditions of mobility and the intersubjective exchanges between inside and outside that are inherent in our lived experiences of locales. It was also a reflection of his interest in the kinds of pictures that can be created through language, particularly of landscape, for landscape has been an important issue for him over the past years (Pearson, Interview). *Patagonia* attempts to encourage an active engagement with images of landscape and place by presenting them as networks of connected places, people and activities.

In one section, the score tells the story of the heroic expansionist exploits of a Welsh horseman who dramatically escaped death by the hands of those who were described in the text as 'a vicious, marauding band from Chile' (Pearson, 'Welsh Landscapes' 3). Then immediately after that—and in an ironic allusion—the story shifts to listing potential forms of sudden death in Patagonia; a catalogue of mundane, far from heroic, tragic incidents that respond to the natural and cultural landscape of the place,

> In Patagonia these are the forms of sudden death:
> Attacked by bees.
> Bitten in the genitals by a mule.
> Childbirth
> Drowning in a drainage channel.
> Evisceration by the kick from a mule.
> Falling down a well
> Gunshot wounds: various
> Heat exhaustion. (Pearson, 'Welsh Landscapes' 4)

The list extends, then the score shifts again into describing four artefacts from Patagonia as if in a museum collection; an arrowhead, a zinc bath, a harmonium and a tin can, each described in a different mode, evoking embodied senses of life and usage in a collage of disjointed and dynamic images that seem like moments from fading memories. The arrowhead is prosaically described like an archaeological remain that suggests an extinct indigenous population, and it is the only point in the text where the Welsh settlers are explicitly acknowledged as colonisers; '[h]owever humane, in Welsh – in this respect at least – were true Conquistadores...' (Pearson, 'Welsh Landscapes' 5). Following from that, and in a different style, the zinc bath is described as

> all-purpose miracle. 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness'.
> Two children having fun...
> One adult perched awkwardly on the rim...
> Sheets, shirts, flannel underwear on the board...
> A half plucked goose, feather flying
> Ducking for apples
> Bubbling jam
> Gathering apples
> Sailing a paper boat
> Watching the toads caught from the channel. (Pearson, 'Welsh Landscapes' 5-6)

The object is not directly linked to a narrative on the experience of Welsh settlers, but it is evocatively articulated in a series of fragmented images. The impression is of a close-up look into the object in order to gain access into its world. After describing the tin can and the harmonium, the narrative turns to the story of Tomi and Eddie Davis, two of the descendents of one of the early settlers who have a large collection of family possessions and farming implements accumulating since the nineteenth century; past and present co-exist in their world. Their story is told, with a vivid sense of detail, from the performers' experience of meeting the eighty year-old brothers in Patagonia and visiting their farmhouse named 'Hyde Park.' Then the text describes a series of ten photographs: people's appearances, dress, objects in the surroundings, all described through the eyes of a stranger or an outside onlooker, inviting the listener to share this disinterested gaze. Photograph 'three' for example is described as

> Seven children, one per year by the look, against the mud wall: all tight-lipped like mother. Whether like father, impossible to tell for the scimitar moustache. Two toys: on a chair back, a doll – skirt held up – body bent in a curtsey; in the foreground, a prancing *palamino*, neck erect, tail flared. (Pearson, 'Welsh Landscapes' 9)

The score continues in separate sections and disconnected blocks of text, until it concludes as it starts, with its core story; that of the shooting of Llwyd ap Iwan by two gunmen (thought to be Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid) told through an eye witness account.[107] How much of that story is based on facts, and how much of it is fiction is not known, but that particular moment of history has grown to occupy an important place in people's memories and imagination in Wales, romanticised further by its association with popular American films.[108]

Pearson explains that in the later reworked text, he excluded the parts that would not make sense without action. Therefore, the dynamics of the original performance that were carried in the excluded parts of the latest version were absent (Interview). The disconnection and interruption between the archival narratives was enhanced by the mode of their delivery. The blocks of text were delivered by the three performers in a detached manner, with a dispassionate relation to the score. The delivery moved in three different consecutive strands between the three performers, with no dialogue, connections or exchange between them as if each was reporting from an isolated place. There was no apparent sense of logic behind dividing the text between the three performers,[109] but each had a marked different register and tone of voice.[110]

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[107] He is a descendent of Michael D. Jones, the force behind the repatriation of over 150 Welsh people to Patagonia. Llwyd ap Iwan ran the Welsh Co-operative store in the Chubut. He was shot by two gunmen in the store on the 29th of December 1909.

[108] The performance then concluded with the voice of performer Eddie Ladd resounding in the performance space through an online voice-call device, direct from Patagonia, and suddenly changing the dynamic of the performance. She was supposed to present her account as someone who is in the actual place, as an attempt to bring it closer to the space in Chapter Arts Centre in real time. However, technical problems with the communication system made her voice unclear when I attended the performance. The call was therefore discontinued.

Lights were subtly dimmed in the silent spaces between the sections of the texts and then turned up again. Those brief moments of silence were heavily loaded with the weight of the text that has just been read, barely allowing for fleeting contemplation. The delivery was almost devoid of expression, emphasising the lack of theatricality or any attempts at characterisation or representation. The words were not uttered to convey specific meanings or attitudes, but they penetrated the space almost like solid objects. The audience member referenced above declares that for him, the text became scenery. After a certain point he was not listening to a story being told anymore, but only to a text being delivered.[111] Shifting between the three voices with their different intonations and registers, stopping and handing in to another voice when one would expect a continuation, interrupted the follow of the narrative even further, preventing the audience's absorption in what was being told.

The impact of interruption and narrative discontinuity is expressed in Benjamin's writings, which stems from his understanding and advocacy of Brecht's epic theatre. Benjamin sees interruption as fundamental to epic theatre for uncovering of conditions and for breaking the stage illusion, which is a process that occurs by punctuating the dramatic action with music and song or other forms of disturbance. The continual discontinuity in epic theatre, or the sudden break in the flow of events, produces a gestural pose necessary for critical reflection. The audience in this instance becomes a witness not to the mere reproduction or to the mundane representation of circumstances as they appear to be, but to the dramatic 'uncovering of conditions' and self-disclosure of their truth content or their underlying causes (Gilloch 153-54). The interruption of flow of narrative and the gestural pause that happens at the moment of shift of text or change of register during the performance, cause a particular moment or a particular text to be distinguished and removed from their original context. Relocating them into a new context, they turn into an alien, strange presence that calls for a renewal of thought and a change of attitude from the reader, bringing to presence images, meanings and ideas beyond what takes place in the performance space. They evoke experiences of another kind, which is part of what Benjamin conceives as 'true experience.' Pearson and Shanks write, '[l]ooking directly at things and you maybe miss their point, their ambiguity as alienated traces. So the best is a sideways look, and a key, perhaps is losing one's way' (*Theatre/Archaeology* 62).

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[109] In the original production in 1992, asserts Pearson, the pieces of texts were divided in that way, with the larger blocks of texts being monologues. During the performance, performers stepped out of the action, walked to the edge of the stage and delivered those monologues in a direct address to the audience, which was a 'shock' for Welsh audiences. It was the first example of that form of 'narrative deconstruction, so who was speaking a particular text or where they were speaking it was not necessarily part of some kind of obvious dramaturgical arc' (Pearson, Interview).

[110] An audience observes that Pearson's delivery was more animated than the others, with a certain rhythm in speaking, Jones's delivery was more subtle, 'not needing' to be animated, while Rees had an engaging presence and a gentle quality to his voice.

[111] I would like to thank Gareth Evans for his valuable comments in this and in the previous note.

I did lose my way during the performance, which was an experience of disorientation but also engagement with the glimpses of the past and the place that the performance evoked; things seemed familiar, yet evidently strange. I became aware of my otherness from what I was receiving; senses of discomfort and incomprehension overcame me. I struggled between on one hand desperately trying to form a coherent narrative or a sustained line of enquiry, and on another hand, an impulse to let go of attempts of a conventional reading and to engage with the narrative debris as they were being unearthed. '[T]he mind continues to seek likeness, consistency, narrative coherence,' Schwenger argues (26). The viewing experience created disruption and incongruity, pushing the viewer to see without submitting to a guiding narrative. The gaps in the telling signified the instability of the past and liberated the audience from the authority of a narrative. Like collections that are never complete; they did not achieve a graspable whole, for there would always be a missing piece that requires creative ways to fill the emptiness that it leaves behind. 'The end is not normally the "truth" of "what happened",' Pearson and Shanks claim. 'Entropic fragments, traces, terminal associations, aftermath, degradation, the sedimentation of everyday life, haunting absences – this is also, we propose, an archaeological sensibility' (*Theatre/Archaeology* 62). Thus the development of the story in *Patagonia* occurs through rupture rather than by sliding from one scene to the other. By this, as Patrice Pavis writes on Brecht's notion of *Gestus*, '[t]he Story does not mask (as does the traditional dramatic form) the illogical nature of the linking of the scenes but lets us become aware of it' (43), which is precisely what occurred in *Patagonia*.

The emphasis in the performance was on upsetting conventional ways of seeing that historical experience and how it is engrained in memory by creating coexisting simultaneous stories that form a narrative out of a series of disconnected materials. Jones thinks that as a Welsh person, it is useful for her to see the different ways by which the non-Welsh (such as Pearson) assess issues related to the Welsh culture and its history. It disrupts tendencies to fall into familiarity or to accept things the way they are (Interview). But, as I mentioned above, it is a method that may risk producing a relation of internal alienation and differentiation. Pearson himself is aware that fragmentation *per se* is not necessarily a productive dynamic of presentation. It does indeed allow for the inclusion of diversity of voices, registers and modes of writing, but the ordering and the dramaturgy in placing the fragments together are significant and need to be approached with care.[112] For example, 'you can include something approaching data, next to the very poetic and then make that work,' which leaves space for audiences' interpretations (Pearson, Interview). The fragments in the score of *Patagonia* resemble objects in a collection, where a sense of narrative emerges out of their difference. As in Schwenger's argument, the narrative of a collection does not fully cohere, it is 'a relationship-between that demands difference and separation as much as linkage,' and this linkage demands an otherness at the heart of similarity, otherwise, we would have only 'monadic identity' (144).

Pearson's articulation of his thoughts on the paradoxical relationship between linkage and separation show that the blocks of text are handled like a collection of objects put together either in congruity or incongruity. He asserts that in a fragmented structure of narrative, as that of *Patagonia,* the separate pieces need to be placed together with specific care, 'all of the efforts, all of the energy has to be in the articulation between one text and the next; what is the hinge between this text and this text [...], so the dramaturgy, the ordering and so on is really significant' (Interview).[113] Thus, with reasserting the diversity of raw material in *Patagonia*

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[112] Pearson declares that his approach to textual deconstruction is influenced by critical writings, such as Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (1990), and Foucault's article 'Of Other Spaces' (1986) published in *Diacritics* journal (Pearson, Interview).

[113] *Patagonia* was Pearson's first attempt at non-narrative writing (Pearson, Interview). It is noted that even though he adopted a similar method of narrative construction in his other solo performances, such as *From Memory* (1992), the transitions between the sections of texts and between the diverse materials in those performances are subtler and less disjointed than in the text of *Patagonia*. He

comes a sense of order out of the disorder, which is located in the space between a fragment and another, in how they are placed together, in the absent and the unsaid. The result is a story that leaves spaces for the audience for critical contemplation and for creating their own stories and ways of understanding. It becomes a story that does not give solutions; but that subverts the comfort of a utopia and dissolves the coherence of the myth. It evokes a series of dialogues and encounters with a place by enacting segments from a once-utopian vision but then reflecting it back onto itself as a site of otherness, which causes rupture in reading such an historical phenomenon. As in the function of quotations in Benjamin's writing, the blocks of materials in *Patagonia* have been detached from a homogenising or mythologising discourse they might have been related to, which moves them from the domain of the singular narrative, into the social and the multiple. The story is not celebrating the colonial project, as much as it is opening it up for observation. By making lists of forms of death specific to a certain locale, and describing artefacts like archaeological remains without giving a single point of view or a justification for the absent details, the performance confronted spectators' anxiety to make sense of a disorder, and invited them to engage in interpretation and analysis; looking at the fragments as clues to the past.

In spite of the attempt to demythologise the experience of Patagonia, however, it did not completely escape a sense of romanticism emanating from the performance and from how the Welsh settlement was presented. A tension was manifest between romanticism and an attempt to subvert it. It was not hard to identify a sense of amazement towards the extraordinary experience, and towards the

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argues that the changes between different voices and registers are easier to achieve in solo works. He believes that it is more difficult to bring that formally for several voices (Interview), as in *Patagonia*.

survival of the Welsh culture there in such a hybrid form, more than a critique of colonisation and its implications. Running through the score in a detached, non-illustrative manner, and describing things prosaically did not clearly demonstrate the attempt to subvert the mythology. Additionally, the experience of the members of Brith Gof during their visit to the Welsh community in Patagonia formed another parallel romanticised mythology, evident, for example, in the section on the visit to the elderly brothers Tomi and Eddie Davis, and also in the half-imagined recollection of the story of the shooting. It seems that in the original staging, the complex scenic elements were in conflict with the text being delivered, which disrupted the romanticism that might be implied in the score. While the latest, much subtler, version did not rely on such a tension between form and content, thus it produced a more challenging experience for the spectator that is devoid of dynamics of subversion such as irony or satire.[114]

The production also raises the following question: when deconstructing such an historical account, which fragments of history are chosen and which ones are left out? The issue of colonisation in the experience of Welsh Patagonia is briefly referenced in the one instance I mentioned above. But in its preoccupation with this specific episode in the history of Wales, the performance leaves the story of the Latin American side of the situation marginalised. The performance acknowledges the shifting boundary between emigration and colonisation, but it does not refer to the dynamics between the Welsh settlers and Patagonia's indigenous population; how they both shared the land. This was also evident in the documentary mentioned above, *The Desert and the Dream*, that celebrates the settlers' achievements with almost no mention of the indigenous population and its position within the colony. Pearson argues that the experience in Patagonia is difficult to locate within the history of colonisation due to the small indigenous population that was already there and that generally formed a good relationship with the Welsh immigrant community. He also thinks that establishing the Welsh settlement was a response to an urge to escape not to conquer. But the colonial question is always there and it is problematic (Interview). It is a complex question that the performance does not claim to find an easy answer to.[115]

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[114] Pearson acknowledges that *Patagonia* in 2008 produced a challenging experience for some audience members, which is why he contemplated placing it second in the double-bill programme after his solo performance. He noticed that some audience members left in the intervals on each night, which could be due to many reasons, not necessarily because of the nature of the performance (Interview).

Jones believes that there is no one way of talking about the experience of Patagonia. The performance in the end was their response, or more accurately, Pearson's response as an outsider to that place, inviting others to construct their own stories about it (Interview). The audience member who attended the latest version declares that as a Welsh person, he came to the performance with some degree of knowledge about Patagonia, which constitutes an integral part of the Welsh history and memory. By viewing a performance on Patagonia in such unconventional form of narrative construction, he was able to construct his own narrative against what was delivered. He thinks that he was given an opportunity to revisit and rethink an established moment in his history in a way that differed from my alienated experience as a non-Welsh viewer who, at the time of the performance, was not prepared with much knowledge of the performance's historical and social contexts and their consequences. He thinks that, although being prepared with this kind of knowledge is not important to view the performance, but having some degree of knowledge is helpful to challenge one's perception and preconceptions of such an historical experience.[116]

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[115] Pearson also adds that as an English person, he is sensitive towards issues closely related to the Welsh culture and history. He is aware of the problems of cultural appropriation and the critique of a different nation, made more complex by his position as an 'outsider,' so he tries to approach these issues with care (Interview).

The final section of this chapter focuses on the idea of language as the site of performance, which invests in the exchange of materiality between language, as a non-physical element, and site, commonly perceived as a physical construct. It uses as a demonstration an attempt by Mike Pearson to locate the site of performance entirely in the text, in addition to the sound and the aural delivery. The notion of site-specificity is thus pushed and radicalised to the point of excluding all traces of a performance's physical components in some cases. This project is in an experimental phase, thus it will be touched upon only briefly as an example with a potential for further research.

5.5. Extending the Notion of Site-Specificity

In *Patagonia* as a practice that articulates an exchange between performance and a place, I identify parallels between its framework and site-specific performance; a relationship that I proposed at the beginning of this chapter. As I demonstrated above, the experience of a place in the past is brought to life in the present for a contemporary audience in ways that invest in the material traces of that past, and in the material and spatial capacities of language through techniques such as interruptions or discontinuity of a dramatic score. The reconsideration of the function of a textual score evoked a new relationship to location and site; a process in which the audience play an active and important part in mobilising. This, as I expressed above, has been a fundamental dynamic in the earlier large-scale site-specific works by Brith Gof that aimed at provoking a series of dialogues and confrontations between performance and location, creating networks of activities rather than linear structures. The use of different elements clashing against each other, and resisting a reading that would synthesise its elements into a single narrative was common in the company's site-specific work. An example is *Haearn* (1993), which was conceived 'as a fractured (and incomplete) work. Like Frankenstein's creature, it was constructed from a number of disparate vital organs and parts' (McLucas qtd. in Kaye, *Art* 220). In those performances, as in *Patagonia*, audiences were also confronted with multiple and interpenetrating narratives and voices that did not lead to a closed reading of event or of site, in what the members of the company called 'hybrid' performance practice. As Nick Kaye argues, '"[p]lace", in this sense, is explicitly constituted *in performance itself*, even where the "site" may have a "parallel identity" of its own, as these interventions activate and challenge readings of location' (*Site-Specific* 55).

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[116] I am indebted to Gareth Evans for his valuable comments.

Kaye's argument here refers to Brith Gof's site-specific work; an argument that I am linking to the performance in *Patagonia* in how the evocation of a place and an experience go beyond the physical boundaries of the site of performance (The Loft in this case). They become embodied in the verbal language, turning it upon itself into a sort of 'being,' as in Merleau-Ponty's argument, and into a mise-en-scène. This means that *Patagonia* can be performed in any site; yet still evoke a sense of that 'other' place. Its text, for Lis Hughes Jones, is a strong entity in itself that, when relocated into a new context, attains a new life of its own, and evokes different kinds of experiences. It is not created for a specific place or specific characters, thus it can be treated as the site of performance itself (Jones, Interview).[117]

Patagonia can be seen as a performance that presents a form of site-specificity in its relationship to its textual score. The openness of the idea of 'site' is suggested in Pearson and McLucas's discussion on the documentation of *Haearn* published in Kaye's *Art into Theatre* (1996). *Haearn*, meaning 'iron,' was originally performed at the Old British Coal Works in Tredegar, Wales in 1993, and it is documented in the form of a graphic score; a notation of material necessary to remake the production by others. Kaye notes that the score deals with all the material used in the place to create the performance, but not the place itself (*Art* 230, 234), implying that the production can be brought to life in any location other than the original; and that the relation between site and performance in that context is one of conflict and paradox rather than harmony. On this Pearson asserts,

> I'm actually quite interested in the way that a score like this can help to create performances in the imagination. Not necessarily physically, but you can create pictures, or extended enormous pictures for people to work with. In a way, it doesn't actually need a physical manifestation of the event itself. (qtd. in Kaye, *Art* 234)

Pearson's comment triggers a thinking of an alternative to the physical site where the performance becomes materialised in the text, in the oral delivery, the sound or even in the imagination. This urge to 'dematerialise' site, while materialising other performance components is evident in the gradual change in

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[117] One of Jones's latest projects is a performance that involves using parts of the libretto and the music from the large-scale site-specific performance by Brith Gof, *Pax* (1991), and relocating them in a completely different context. The new context is a smaller-scale intimate performance that involves grafting apple trees. So the relocated text shifts from the context of a performance about an environmental disaster and that uses resources liberally, such as smoke and electricity, into another, more positive, evocation of environmental responsibility in relation to site (Jones, Interview; Pearson, Interview). Thus, the text holds a new meaning in the new context, carrying the weight of the performance as its site.

Pearson's current practice in relation to site. He argues that his recent concerns shifted from the large-scale site-specific works of the 1980s and the early 1990s that took place inside large industrial buildings, into concerns with landscapes and urban- or cityscapes, which is a body of work that he describes as 'far less architectonic,' and 'much more ephemeral in its relationship with place' (Interview). He thinks that it is not necessary to build things 'at the scale of civil engineering anymore' as a way of evoking experiences of site-specific performance. The nature and the definitions of site-specific work have changed, while still being provocative and being capable of achieving the aims of the earlier practice, but by other means. These aims, according to Pearson, are 'taking audiences to unfamiliar locations, and thereby, not only upsetting the conventions of theatre by doing that, but also to reveal places to people that they wouldn't, under normal circumstances, have gone to' (Interview).

Evoking such experiences, and creating events in ways that cross the boundaries of physical limitations, and that reconsider the relationship between text and a place are extended in one of Pearson's most recent projects. Whether language can build an impression of locale without the need for visual sources, thus challenging conventional forms of representation, is the main focus of the *Carrlands* project (2007). *Carrlands* is an audio work that consists of a series of sound compositions, combining spoken word, music and sound effects, inspired by, and set at, three locations in the agricultural landscape of North Lincolnshire: Snitterby Carrs*,* Hibaldstow Carrs and Horkstow Carrs. It was developed with a small research grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and is available for download as digital files from a dedicated website and also as compact disks. It is a case study that proposes site-specific performance as a process and a mode of enquiry into the culturally diverse ways in which a landscape is made, used, and interpreted (*Carrlands.* Arts and Humanities).

Carrlands project's series of especially composed audio works offer guided orientation at a number of places rarely visited but which have their own unique characteristics, qualities and attractions. According to its initiators, the project aims to enhance and stimulate public appreciation and understanding of a particular landscape; by encouraging users to visit out-of-the-way places, guiding and informing their presence, and illuminating aspects that do not immediately or easily reveal themselves. The works integrate spoken text, musical composition, with subtle instructions to users and invitations to action. The texts are in the form of creative writing for solo voice delivered by Pearson, drawing together material from archaeology, geography, natural history and folklore with detailed and first-hand experiences, opinions and memories of local scholars and inhabitants. Suggestions for using this material include the freedom to choose when and where to access the material. If listening from a distance, a number of attached photographs are provided as visual references, although picturing the landscape in the imagination is encouraged. Listeners may also take the audio works to the actual locations, at liberty to select the time, season, weather, personal mood and social conditions of their encounter, or they might choose to listen to the material in any location other than the one referred to. The project aims to develop a methodology for examining the complexity of place and to enhance public understanding of landscape. It is proposed as an 'innovative' form of site-specific performance where performers and site are absent and the audiences play an active role in the performance's creative process and progression. It encourages participants to actively engage with the audio material and to devise their own ways of animating it, creating their own methods of relating to the landscapes evoked. The project thus proposes to ‘explicate landscape as other than merely visual construct’ (*Carrlands.* Arts and Humanities), perhaps in an attempt to overcome the problems of representation by completely negating it.

In the Landscape and Environment annual conference, *Living Landscapes*, presented at Aberystwyth University in June 2009, Pearson, musican Johna Hardy and Hugh Fowler, performed a live reinterpretation of the Hibaldstow Carrs section from *Carrlands* project as a remix for Pearson’s live voice, Hardy’s live music, and a recorded soundtrack, in addition to projecting visual images. Pearson argues that the performance was well received by the audience. It became more than simply an illustrated lecture accompanied by music. He recalls: ‘I was very busy with the text [being delivered], but I occasionally looked up and some people were sitting, looking at the slides, and other people were sitting there with their eyes closed, and that was the best place to be for them.’ The impulse of some audiences to exclude visual references from their reception of the work provoked Pearson to think of the emerging question of sound and text in relation to landscape, which was one of the main themes at the conference that was manifest in many of the given presentations there. Pearson contemplates ‘whether the language can really build an impression of locale without the need for visual sources,’ which is partly why he is currently encouraged by ‘pushing the aural’ in his performance practice (Interview).

Regardless of how successful this project has been in achieving its aims and objectives, it offers an example of the ability of language and the aural to materialise an experience of landscape.[118] It pushes the idea of 'site' further by presenting a performance that is devoid of physical presences of any kind, leaving it entirely to the audience to construct the shape, form, duration and location of the performance, and giving them the full power to place, or misplace, the text and sound in relation to the landscape being evoked, thus opening up its reading and interpretation. This is a work that exists entirely in the 'diegetic' space of performance, breaking the conventional limits of site-specificity. It tries to show that the sense of place is not preconditioned, but it is a process of continual invention; a dialogue between people and places.

5.6. Conclusion

The previous chapters looked at the dialogic exchange between the subject and the object, examining its manifestations and implications in performance practices. The Hegelian notions of objectification, and the negation of negation, were examined; understood as positive and productive dynamics in the context of performance. The two case studies in chapters Three and Four explored these concepts and their implications in the fields of theatre and performance art where the body is placed at the centre of the work along with the object. In this chapter, the idea of objectification was pushed beyond physical or solid objects, which extends a discussion that started in the previous two case studies. The chapter tested the potential in the idea of objectification when it is applied to a linguistic construct such as a performance text. Consequently language, as a component of a dramatic narrative, was seen as the site of performance itself.

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[118] Mike Pearson declared that audience responses to *Carrlands* project have not been traced so far due to the difficulty of distributing the online content. But he aims to engage with the project in the future by taking a group of students on a tour using the audio material (Goldsmiths). He also mentioned that the live performance presented during the *Living Landscapes* conference generated interest. He explains that two of the conference's delegates who attended his performance are 'thinking of doing a project where they heard the live one, then they are going to listen to the recorded one, the website one, and then to go to the landscape and walk there, and not listen to anything, and see whether there's a kind of replaying of information when you are simply walking. So the landscape becomes a mnemonic for the artwork' (Interview).

In this chapter, I argued for language's ability to rearticulate experiences and to bring a place into presence through language's material capacities. This characteristic of language can be embedded in forms of performance where the emphasis is placed on the narrative and the score to convey past experiences. Touching on Benjamin's understanding of storytelling as a mode of processing and reconstituting experience, in addition to his use of 'quotation,' or discontinuous forms of writing as a way of reawakening perceptions of history, I examined the idea of 'telling' as a creative tool that can be used to mobilise experiences and to emphasise the materiality of the dramatic discourse, presenting a form of 'language mise-en-scène.' This dynamic of presentation necessitates a specific dramatic form that leaves space for audiences to construct their own experiences. In other words, and as in Benjamin's proposal, this form of telling takes part in mobilising an experience of the past through a ruptured construction of narrative that detaches ideas from a homogenising and mythologising discourse they might have been part of, highlighting their instability. By this, knowledge of the past calls for questioning and active engagement rather than passive acceptance.

As a case study, the chapter focused on *Patagonia*, a performance that uses telling and oral delivery as its main presentational forms. It demonstrated the dialectical nature of a fractured narrative where 'rupture' allows the tension inherent in human experiences to be evoked. Similarly, Pearson and Shanks in *Theatre/Archaeology* express the need for 'rupture' in order to resonate 'authentic imagination' of the past, not by attempting an 'authentic representation,' but by evoking rather than determining singular interpretation. They stress that 'the haunting of the past is not to do with “authenticity,” meaning the simple material and empirical presence of the past’ (*Theatre/Archaeology* 118). This is a form of telling that, as Benjamin puts it, does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing (‘The Storyteller’ 91). Seen from another perspective, this approach of evoking experiences of the past can be counterproductive, producing a form of fragmentation that may lead to the alienation of the subject and dissolving the work’s political efficacy. Therefore, this method needs to be approached with awareness of its ethical implications and of its possibility to reduce experiences to a variety of components at odds with one another rather than in communication.

I extended the proposal in this chapter further by arguing that the ability of language and the act of telling to evoke experiences and provoke new ways of understanding history take part in bringing a place to presence, thus opening up a performance space and transforming it into a receptor of distant and absent places. By this the relation between performance and site is mobilised, and the notion of site-specificity can be destabilised and expanded. This, as I tried to demonstrate, is apparent in *Patagonia* in how the experience of ‘otherness’ and dislocation inherent in that historical phenomenon, and the alienating nature of the place, are expressed in a non-authoritative juxtaposition of traces. The performance offers a complex accumulation of narratives of a place, or a ‘deep map,’ which is a term that stems from Pearson and Shanks’ elaboration of the analogy between performance and archaeology. Thus a connection between this form of telling and site-specificity can be located. As Pearson and Shanks put it, ‘[p]erformance itself can be a rearticulation of site: language can return as a reading on to and into them, as a reinterpretation’ (‘Performing’ 51). Performance offers possible ways of challenging the hegemony of a singular voice in its rearticulation of an experience of a place that is tied to a significant moment in history and that is imbedded in cultural memory. I proposed by looking at *Patagonia* viewing experiences of difference, that go beyond enclosures of representation and that can bring to the forefront the otherness and instability of the past and the heterogeneity of experiences.

Chapter Six

Conclusion: From Duality to Ambiguity

The main aim of this thesis has been to re-examine the relationship between the human subject and the physical object within different frameworks of performance practice, exploring the potentials in transgressing common ways of seeing it. This relationship, which is fundamental for human existence, has often been conceived within hierarchical modes of understanding that place the object in a subordinate position in relation to a superior subject. The thesis has drawn attention to alternative views to such modes of understanding, highlighting the role and presence of the object as more than a subordinate or a passive element, but as an active entity in dynamics of performance making and reception. The thesis has emphasised the role of the physical object in redefining conventional views and approaches to performance during the making process, as well as in the performance space and for the audience at the receiving end. In order to establish this alternative viewpoint, the thesis has paid attention to the marginal side of this relationship: the object and its capacities, proposing ways of seeing it beyond ideas of functionality, utility and representation. The object in this context is not exploited as a secondary support for the performer that is conditioned by frameworks of property, nor is it approached for its potential to mimic the human form or as a mirror for its subjectivities. The object is considered as an important element that is endowed with theatricality embedded in its intrinsic materiality. In that case, the materials' inherent qualities (their visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile qualities) activate the theatrical and performative potentialities of the object in relation to the human performer.

Such a concern with contesting the marginalised status of objects has been one of the motivating forces behind dedicating an issue of *Performance Research* journal to objects (2007). In its opening essay, the issue's editors remark on how theatre can misrepresent those physical elements by insisting on seeing them beyond what they actually are. Through the faculties of representation and mimesis, the object is often reduced to nil; annihilated by transforming its 'thingness' into just another means by which the spectacle may be advanced. They argue that 'if we look carefully at the nature of the stage object, or prop, it may be that through such a "thing" thinking may safeguard a certain condition of being' (Clarke, Gough and Watt 1). According to the authors' proposition, which supports the one adopted in this thesis, the object must be considered in terms of its nature as belonging and revealing in itself. This echoes Martin Heidegger's thesis in his essay 'The Thing,' where he declares his belief that the 'thingness' of the thing is often concealed and forgotten by scientific knowledge. By its annihilation Heidegger means that '[t]he nature of the thing never comes to light, that is, it never gets a hearing' (170). Translating this into performance situations, one of the main propositions in this thesis has been to develop a way of 'hearing' the thing and its embedded material characteristics, investing in its expressive potentials beyond the reductions of abstractions, functionality or linguistic analogies. In Heidegger's terms, '[t]he first step towards such vigilance [for things to appear as things] is the step back from the thinking that merely represents—that is, explains—to the thinking that responds and recalls' (181). The step back from thinking might well describe the position of the audience in relation to a performance event, which the thesis has demonstrated in different contexts of presentation. By fostering such attitude, the aim is to prevent a collapse back onto a mode of appropriation of the object, and instead to bring to the fore the question of subject-object opposition. By this the thesis has set up the relationship between subject and object as a continuous process of exchange that questions both positions as a priory. It is a process that necessarily involves moments of shifting between the two positions, which results in a state of ambiguity as a mode of existence shared between performer and materials. The thesis has demonstrated that this tension cannot be resolved into one mode or the other, thus the state of ambiguity needs to be accepted as intrinsic to performance processes, and at the same time, it is a state that mobilises and nurtures the creative process.

David George in an article from 1989 titled ‘On Ambiguity: Towards a Post-Modern Performance Theory’ argues that in performance, two possibilities co-exist in an unresolved dialectical tension, which he terms as ‘performance ambiguity’ (72). Performing, therefore, is a deliberate creation of ambiguities that aims to expose contradictions rather than resolving them, which provoke the audience to dialectical enquiry. This dynamic of tension and ambiguity, the employment of contradictory signs, is not new to performance (it has been employed by Brecht and it is identified in earlier performance traditions such as Noh and Kathakali), but as George explains, its range and significance have been restricted by the efforts at binary closure characterising Western thought. The paradoxical ambiguities of performance experience have traditionally been ‘resolved’ by the typical Western process of privileging one term over the other. This attitude is ascribed, George continues, to the logocentrism of Western culture, its adoption of the text as epistemological paradigm that is authored and authorised, purposeful and meaningful. Words, however, devalue the uniqueness of experiences, replacing them by the false security of classes, systems and interpretations (72-74).

It is mainly against this centrality of the text that this thesis has formulated its discourse, calling attention to the equality of other performance elements as authors, purposeful and meaningful in themselves. The thesis has subverted notions of ‘wholeness’ and closure of binaries embedded in approaches to the text, recognising states of paradoxes, doubles and doubts as ontological parts of human experiences, and consequently of performance. In performance, time and space are restlessly sliced into layers of difference and double perceptions. Thus the intrinsic relationship between subject and object at the heart of this thesis has been read and experienced within an interlocking and fluctuating system of ambiguities. The hyphen in the subject-object relation is itself a significant sign of ambiguity that both joins and separates. Underlying this is Hegel’s dialectics of negativity, where ambiguities create temporary states in which two opposing forces are not reduced to one, but co-exist and are preserved in their difference. The forces are not reconciled, but, rather, retain their integrity and difference but are purged of antagonism; it is a double negative that creates an affirmative (George, ‘On Ambiguity’ 81). Objectification as such, inherent in experiences of performance, is often assumed to be somehow the opposite or a betrayal of subjective being; a compromise of authentic self. The thesis has exposed the simplification of such view: authentic selves are not betrayed by objectification or by acknowledging the status of the object as ‘entity,’ but the selves are experienced in conjunction with them. The self arises and is experienced not in opposition to object, but co-existentially with it, each is possible and necessary in relation to, and because of the other.

The introductory chapter has traced some of the common attitudes in Western critical thinking towards this paradoxical and ambiguous nature of the subject-object dialectical relationship, both in performance and beyond. These views have moved from outright rejection and scepticism; to attempts to resolve the paradox by radically privileging one side over the other (either by dehumanising the performer; fetishising the object; or romanticising the subject); to embracing and accepting ambiguity as intrinsic to human existence and its relationship to the social and material world; to the attempt to expose paradoxes and reverse unitary 'solutions.' The latter concern found ground for expression and experimentation in some forms of performance practice, such as performance and body art. Throughout these discourses, the subject-object tension has emerged as one that is constantly negotiated, examined and transgressed but never reaching a point of stability or fixity. It has appeared that rather than resolving it, performance thrives on such instability, and that the 'voice of things' (Ponge 1972), beyond the limitations of hierarchic discourses, is essential to activate such experiences where difference is primordial.

The discussions of the object's efficacy in its interactions with the human subject have lead to the idea of the 'agentive' object. Provoking sceptical debate, this controversial idea has often been taken as implying the object as a social agent divorced from its maker's agency and from the conditions of its creation. Attributing agency to the object in this way threatens human's agency. What this study has emphasised, however, is the object as an agent within a system of action that motivates responses, meanings and implications, rather than simply seeing it in terms of a 'self-sufficient' agent equal to the autonomous human agency. It is about the agency of the object's own 'thingness,' how it acts upon the world and upon persons through its own materiality, not through a kind of 'free will.' This attitude towards the object requires sensibility; an acute perception or responsiveness to objects. Kantor is an artist who has clearly fostered and articulated such sensibility to objects in both theory and practice. He held poor, useless, objects in high esteem, identifying the potentials in their natural attributes and finding the theatricality embedded in their intrinsic materiality. The structure of an object, such as a broken umbrella, alters the space and dictates how a performer relates to it. Opening an umbrella, for example, the way its skeleton pushes and stretches the 'skin' into a blossoming, the fluttering sound of such action, is itself a moment of performance that leaves its mark in the space and on the person. The tension between functionality and its transgression underlines the 'autonomy' of the object in the moments of performance. Poetry, metaphor and theatricality here are evoked by the object's poor reality, or its 'essence,' in Kantor's terms, outside the functions ascribed to it by life. It is not an object of representation (the umbrella does not stand for something other than what it is), but it is an object of 'the lowest rank' bereft of stylisation, glitter, false pathos or academic beauty (Kantor, 'Reality' 124).[119] Kantor meditates on such an object:

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[119] Contemporary British artist and puppeteer, Nenagh Watson, is currently working on a project where she traces Kantor's use of the umbrella within his paintings and writings. Revisiting his sensibility to the object, Watson reflects on Kantor's utilisation of the umbrella in the collaborative investigation *Conversation with an Umbrella,* which looks at the autonomy of the object in relation to the human performer. As part of that project, she placed broken umbrellas on stage for the audience to 'watch.' The presence of the object, its poor reality, was enough to create a theatrical experience for her, albeit challenging for the audience. Watson argues, '[s]uch proclamations have the potential to revolutionise contemporary object/puppet practice. It places the autonomy back within the object' (*Collisions* 23).

> I created an object
> whose utilitarian character
> stands in opposition to the
> new function that creates this
> oppressive and brutal
> reality.
> I assigned to it
> a movement and function
> that are absurd when compared with its original ones.
> Having done so, I elevated it
> to the plane of
> ambiguous meanings and
> disinterested functions, that is, to the plane of
> poetry. ('The Autonomous' 46)

Exploring the object's 'agency,' not as a matter of full human subjective agency, but in terms of the efficacy of its inherent material values has been expressed, in theory and in practice, by the practitioners discussed in this thesis. In different approaches and attitudes, they articulated an affinity to the object and a respect for its presence and role in performance. The artists' work did not reflect an anxiety towards the subject-object dynamic and its implications; they willingly and openly embraced its ambiguity and transgressed its fixity, which helped to activate productive working dynamics for creators as well as for receivers. Yael Davids investigated the limitations of this dialectic by pushing its boundary and negotiating an equitable trajectory within the performance frame. For her, the object in the gallery space ceases to be the passive recipient of looking, but through a conjunction with the human figure, it returns back the look of the subject, moving and speaking of issues beyond the limitations of its silent and inert materiality. The artist's desire has been to invert the realities of the object and the human body, exploring the questions that arise from her attempts to objectify the body and to 'subjectify' the object. The object becomes the 'other.' It is 'other' necessary for the survival of the subject and vice versa; they both rely on each other; they are present in time and in space for, and because of, the other. At the same time, the object becomes the end of the subject; it violently oppresses its expressive agency, which paradoxically, mobilises that agency in the Hegelian sense of the dialectics. The thesis has demonstrated some of the political implications of the merging of bodies and ordinary objects in such form of presentation that challenges the boundaries of functionality and representation. The potential inherent in objectification when it is negotiated as a politicised mechanism of examination had been underlined, opening up a space for further enquiry.

In a theatrical framework outside the gallery space, the members of Improbable theatre company developed a system of working that gives space for the object along with the human performer. Similarly to Kantor's sensibilities to objects, the inherent values of poor physical materials are not secondary, but they are part of what constitutes the company's work ethos and what contributes to their legacy as theatre makers. The shift between the utility and the theatricality of their signature materials is negotiated to create parallel stories in the performance space. Whether it is newspaper, corrugated iron or sticky tape, the physicality of objects transforms the space into constant actions, creating another narrative on stage parallel to that created, spoken or sung by performers. Dramaturgy is approached as 'alchemy;' creating spectacles out of humble everyday things by allowing them to 'have their say,' as the makers express on several occasions. By looking at the work process of Improbable, the thesis has emphasised the ability of the object to mobilise a work process as a social phenomenon. Objects and materials are approached as vehicles for enhancing practice and for developing understandings and communications between the self and the other during moments of collaborative performance making.

The duality offered by the object (showing one reality while also showing another simultaneously) has the potential to constitute conditions and vocabularies constructive for performer training, consequently transfiguring and advancing contemporary performance practice.

Extending their concern with breaking the hierarchy of the performance elements and their interest in exploring the marginal aspects of creation, the makers of Improbable—as well as Davids to a certain extent—have tried to find new ways of creating performance that highlight the material qualities of the written text, defying its fixity and its representational authority. Mike Pearson and his collaborators approached this materiality in the shape of a disconnected narrative and oral delivery of an historically and culturally conditioned experience. The 'montage' aspect of combining different voices, narratives and archival remains created a performance experience that is open and inclusive, but that is also alienating. Alienation, that stems from the objectification of the narrative, encourages active interrogation and self-reflexivity at the risk of distancing the audience by rearticulating an experience as a site of estrangement. The thesis has kept this problem as a question open for further examination, but it explored the potential of this method of narrative construction to question the linearity of dominant discourses of history, culture and identity through its adoption of a multiplicity of multivocal narratives. Engendering notions of cultural diversity and positive differentiation, this form can mobilise structures of presentation to question linearity of meanings and to overcome imagined totality of a place, which can take part in 'the reconceptualisation of places in a way that might challenge exclusivist localisms based on claims of some eternal authenticity' (Massey, *For Space* 20). It has the potential to express experiences of places as 'processes,' to use Doreen Massey's terms, as articulated moments in networks of social relations, full of internal conflicts ('A Global' 29). The specificity of place in those performance attempts is not recalled as a result of an internalised history, but it is specificity that is continually reproduced. They reflect the mixing of effects embodied in one place, as in the Welsh Patagonian experience, which is a phenomenon of cultural hybridity common to contemporary societies that are often constituted by people's mobility, and thus by different layers of histories, peoples and cultures.

Encounters with such locales, from the past and in the present, demand a revitalisation of artistic expression that would sustain wider understandings of a sense of place in contemporary life, critiquing understandings of place as internally coherent and bounded. The thesis, therefore, has proposed viewing experiences that go beyond the enclosure of representation, and that brings to the fore the otherness of the past and the heterogeneity of experiences. One of the problems raised by this form of mobilising experiences is whether it actually engenders productive dialogues between different communities and constituencies around issues of place and belonging, or whether, to the contrary, it fosters differentiation as a way of distancing an 'other.' Not to mention the issue of intercultural appropriation in the textual utilisation evident in both Pearson's *Patagonia* and Glass's *Satyagraha*, and the ethical implications it may entail.

As suggested in the above statement, the thesis opens up avenues for further thought, particularly related to the ethics of performance. As already discussed in Chapter Four, Nicholas Ridout, in view of Emmanuel Levinas's postmodern philosophy of ethics, argues that performance encourages the spectator to see it as an opportunity to experience an encounter with someone else rather than as an exploration of his or her own subjectivity. Performance invites the spectator to assume ethical responsibility for the life of the other (8). This applies to the close and physical presence of the live body of the performer. The argument can also be extended to include the other relationships constituting a performance process, which demand an ethical obligation towards other beings and also towards material things. This approach to performance, as an encounter, takes part in destabilising the centrality of the self by paying more attention to the other and by encouraging relationships based on openness, dialogue and a respect for difference (Ridout 53, 54).

The case studies examined, and the set of relationships governing them, have raised questions about the relationship between the self and the other; whether seeing the latter as the fellow performer; the spectator; a culture and its products; or even the object itself. These invite a rethinking of the subject-object dialectic in performance in relation to the issue of ethics, particularly regarding the physical interaction between the body and the object in the performance space. Presenting the body as the object of art; the responsibility of action and spectatorship; the representation of politically conditioned and problematic experience; my presence within the object of critical investigation and in relation to its makers; are some of the issues opened up in this study that invite further exploration, and that demand reconsideration in terms of their ethical implications.

This thesis has traced a journey for the object from the direct visceral contact with the human body to the ephemerality of the language as object. The notion of objectification moved from the solid to the immaterial and the fleeting. Throughout this journey, the thesis has offered a multiplicity of propositions that invests in the subject-object dialectic as an ambiguous and mobile construct that can take part in advancing understandings and practices of performance. This construct needs to be liberated from the limitations of rationality in order to nurture its potentiality. As D.W. Winnicott puts it, '[m]y contribution is to ask for a paradox to be accepted and tolerated and respected, and for it not to be resolved. By flight to split-off intellectual functioning it is possible to resolve the paradox, but the price of this is the loss of the value of the paradox itself' (xii).

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