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**Being-With in Contemporary  
Performing Arts**

Neofelis Verlag

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Eliane Beaufils

## On Being-With

We know the scene: there is a gathering, and someone is telling a story. We do not yet know whether these people gathered together form an assembly, if they are a horde or a tribe. But we call them brothers and sisters because they are gathered together and because they are listening to the same story. We do not know whether the one speaking is from among them or if he is an outsider. We say that he is one of them but different from them.

(Jean-Luc Nancy: *The Inoperative Community*<sup>1</sup>)

This is how the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy tells the story of myths, in a movement that itself recalls the mythic tale: he transmits a scene that is intimately known, appealing to each of us. For the philosopher, the myth is a ‘mouth’ through which the community comes to speak and to recognize itself.

Literature knows this; and theater inherits the same scene, implicating our need for narration, sense and sharing. But these needs as well as the means to fulfill them are unceasingly put into question as sense is redeployed. This has led many contemporary philosophers to reflect

1 Jean-Luc Nancy: *The Inoperative Community*, trans. from the French by Peter Connor / Lisa Garbus / Michael Holland / Simona Sawhney. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1991, p. 86. French version: *La communauté désœuvrée*. Paris: Bourgois 1986, p. 109: “Nous connaissons la scène: il y a des hommes rassemblés, et quelqu’un qui leur fait un récit. Ces hommes rassemblés, on ne sait pas encore s’ils font une assemblée, s’ils sont une horde ou une tribu. Mais nous les disons ‘frères’, parce qu’ils sont rassemblés, et parce qu’ils écoutent le même récit. Celui qui raconte, on ne sait pas encore s’il est des leurs, ou si c’est un étranger.”

on political difference: the difference between politics (or the *police* for Jacques Rancière) and the political, conceived of as a space of formation and articulation of new categories or perceptions. Some of them, like Alain Badiou or Rancière, consider theater as a privileged realm of thinking because of its particular capacity to self-reflect, offering itself as the locus of the questioning of sense and habitus. Is theater not

an institution that is able to unsettle authorities that have been constituted elsewhere, that can criticize untenable ideological positions and dissolve patterns of order and doctrines of any kind [?] Theater – in accordance with a view widely held until recently by theater practitioners and commentators – is a critical practice[.]<sup>2</sup>

But this critical vocation of theater raises concerns, because it has become difficult to refer to a common sense.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the main concern that animates Nancy's reflections on being-with until 2017 is precisely the question of how to make sense together now. Since the 1980s, he underlines that humans are first of all co-existent: they are obviously always together with others. But this being-with is far from being confined to a mere co-presence: "the thought of 'us' is anterior to any other thought [and therefore to any conscious co-presence...] it is not a representative thought, but a *praxis* and an *ethos*"<sup>4</sup>. Being-with is, more than the horizon of our thinking, our condition. Humans can only make sense in relation to others. The meaning is "meaning of Being': not only as the 'meaning of with,' but also, and above all, as the 'with' of meaning. Because none of these three terms [...] precedes or grounds the other, each designates the co-essence of the others"<sup>5</sup>. The philosopher comes hence to define being-with as a place: "the common does not present itself as the subject of sense but as its place", "nor spontaneous nor calculated", it is a place that enables "the movement thanks to what one gets out of

2 CFP for the 13<sup>th</sup> conference of the Society for Theater Studies: Theater als Kritik / Theater as Critique. [http://www.theaterforschung.de/print.php4?file=inc\\_dates\\_auswertung.php4&ID=3770](http://www.theaterforschung.de/print.php4?file=inc_dates_auswertung.php4&ID=3770) (accessed April 03, 2017).

3 Ibid.

4 Jean-Luc Nancy / Daniel Tyradellis: *Qu'appelons-nous penser?* Zurich: Diaphanes 2013, p. 38 (transl. E. B.).

5 Jean-Luc Nancy: *Being singular plural*. Stanford: Stanford UP 2000, p. 22.

simple identity”.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the pitfalls encountered by the development of being-with are not few, especially as it is not conceivable to return to myths and communities.

Indeed, myths and communities go hand in hand, since the group speaks through myth and this speaking enables the identity settings within the collectivity and of each person towards the other. In giving the community an essence, myth gives one to the individual who recognizes him/herself as guided by narratives, principles and goals. In this way, Nancy casts the subject as relation from oneself to oneself, as transparent consciousness, into question. We are never anywhere other than “in between,” in the relation – to the situation, from consciousness to consciousness – so that according to Nancy the human being has to be thought of starting from relation and becoming. It has somehow to be conceived of as *work in progress* and as endless process, similarly to every “community”: that must not become an “*œuvre*”, an “artwork”.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, the multiplication of totalitarianisms during the 20<sup>th</sup> century played a determining role in this awareness, and the philosopher warns us against the first of the myths creeping up on us: deploring lost communities, which have undoubtedly never existed as fraternally as we dreamt them. Rather, Nancy calls for a nourishing of the ‘between’, the sharing of meaning, which is also the sharing of singularities within the being-with. In fact, “as sense lies not in the unity of an ‘all’ [totalitarian or divine ...], sense lies in sharing and in the passage *between us*”<sup>8</sup>. Being-with thus designates an ontological as well as a symbolic process, which Nancy associates further with ‘world making’ in a time when the world is not thinkable any more as an entity or connected with an ordering.

If the failure of the Soviet regime has no doubt given a fundamental impetus to the philosophical reflections on community, the dysregulations / disruptions of the world order and the unabated conflicts

6 Jean-Luc Nancy: Un sens commun. In: *Libération*, 26.02.2015. [http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2015/02/26/apres-charlie-retrouver-un-sens-commun\\_1210406](http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2015/02/26/apres-charlie-retrouver-un-sens-commun_1210406) (accessed March 20, 2017; transl. E. B.).

7 This explains the title of his first book on the topic: *The Inoperative Community / La Communauté désœuvrée*, referring to the ‘opus’ / ‘œuvre’ that cannot be made.

8 “Comme le sens n’est pas assignable dans l’unité d’un tout [totalitaire ou divin ...], le sens est dans le partage et dans le passage *entre nous*.” (Nicolas Poirier: Entretien avec Jean-Luc Nancy. In: *Le Philosophoire* 7 (1999), pp. 12–13. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-le-philosophoire-1999-1-page-11.htm> (accessed March 20, 2017; transl. E. B.).)

provided fodder for them in the 1990s, so that Nancy finds the key notions of ‘political’ and of ‘communism’ objectionable – communism should be “literary”<sup>9</sup>. The return of very conservative, identitarian movements in Europe, which can be related to the threat of terrorism or to the dismay provoked by the impacts of neoliberalism, makes being-with even more problematic. But the lack of global orders and of common reference frames seems the biggest challenge for the philosopher to take up, to the extent that he coins with Aurélien Barrau the concept of “*struction*”. This concept is meant to be accountable for the large network within which we have to live today and which invalidated hierarchies as well as our coordinates and dichotomic distinctions between nature and technology, economy and politics, or body and mind.<sup>10</sup> Thus for both thinkers a being-with less engaged in an aleatory structure should be developed, one that departs more from sensing and feeling, and which is not essentially experienced in the mode of duty.<sup>11</sup> The terribly complex dimensions of contemporary being-with have notable aesthetic and artistic implications. First, art has a particular dimension according to Nancy: since the ‘between’ cannot be accomplished, it can only inscribe itself. To inscribe relations and sharing means to expose the singular beings to one another, to show the openness of meaning and to expose this openness. The place of this inscription and of this exposure is above all literature, “the other of the sacred text (going back to the One)”, or art, “what evades the assumption of a unified signification”<sup>12</sup>: art and literature live from an open sense.

9 Poirier: Entretien avec Jean-Luc Nancy (transl. E. B.). It is recalled that Nancy distinguishes like the other philosophers engaged in these discussions on being-in-common, most of all Claude Lefort, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Giorgio Agamben and Robert Esposito, politics (or the police for Rancière) from *the* political as a movement of sense in common. The political is the crucible of discussions that give birth to categories and institutions involved in politics (“the distribution of the sensible” according to Rancière).

10 Aurélien Barrau / Jean-Luc Nancy: *Dans quels mondes vivons-nous?* Paris: Galilée 2011.

11 Esposito shows that community is primarily founded on the ‘munus’, the duty as the etymology underlines. To the sharing of duty (com-munitas) Esposito opposes the im-munitas, the part of the common that liberates the modern individual from a single munus. See Roberto Esposito: *Bios. Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008.

12 “[La littérature.] l’autre du texte sacré (qui retourne à l’Un)”, “[ou bien l’art] ce qui se soustrait à l’assomption d’une signification unie.” (Poirier: Entretien avec Jean-Luc Nancy, p. 13 (transl. E. B.).)



They appeal to sharing in spite of the impossibility of a unified sharing, they interrupt sense, and they are also able to formulate a not-yet-communicated that is in suspension, echoing or rather responding to the others, readers or spectators. But if art is the place of the inscription, it is also “the index of the problem of sharing sense”<sup>13</sup>.

We know that it would not suffice to consider live arts as oases of being-with, on the grounds that they put performers and spectators into relation, and that they want to keep awake the consciousness of sense in becoming between the stage and stalls, or rather between the stage and the different spectators. In conjunction with the becoming problematic of common sense – or with its necessary reflection in common – scenic arts have experimented with sharing processes of sense and of the senses, through frontal as well as immersive apparatuses. By now, performing arts have multiplied experiences of participation, happenings or delegated performances for fifty years. In theaters, directors constantly tested new performative or postdramatic forms, building on interruption and non-linearity, including for instance choralities and fictionalization of the spectator that wished to call out directly for the reflection of the spectators. But it is necessary to analyze the experiences in the light of recent critical books written on the topic.

Regarding participation, several scholars, in particular Claire Bishop and Juliane Rebentisch, underlined that one had to question participation-based projects, sometimes relying on preconceived intentions and lacking self-critical reflectivity.<sup>14</sup> It is not only a matter of instrumentalization, if not manipulation inherent to many participatory or immersive actions. One has also to consider the relevance of certain relational aesthetics: the communities constituted during the performances are often idealized, as if we waited for these moments to exchange significant words, so that certain performances seem to be situated in a post-apocalyptic universe where people no more enter in contact yet would be happy to do so.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, it is important

13 “[L]’index du problème [du] partage du sens” (ibid., p. 14 (transl. E. B.)).

14 See Claire Bishop: *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. New York: Verso 2012; Juliane Rebentisch: Participation in Art: 10 Theses. In: Alexander Dumbadze / Suzanne Hudson (eds): *Contemporary Art. 1989 to the Present*. Hoboken: Wiley 2013.

15 See Dan Karholm: Reality Art. The Case of Oda Projesi. In: *Leitmotiv* 5 (2005/2006), pp. 115–124, here p. 120.

to take into consideration the nature of the intersubjective relations woven during a participatory project, the part of personal, creative reflection, to which the performance appeals and which might go beyond the present moment. Is participation a way to generate sense if it has no finality? Might not the risk be to emphasize a simple, non-reflexive empathy, or on the contrary forms of resistance regarding a superficial and artificial consensus? Kai van Eikels points out the frequent reference to oneself, to processes of acknowledgment by others, or even to instrumentalization of the others; that means that one often becomes spectator of one's own performance rather than of the others, on a less open mode than during some frontal set-ups.<sup>16</sup> For Rebentisch, the most advanced performing art now reflects participation as a problem, not as a solution.<sup>17</sup>

That is the reason why this book does not focus on performances which are primarily participatory. It concentrates on performances that could enable a development of thought on common issues and somehow in common, trying in this way to develop an active being-with between performers and spectators. In *Performing Politics* and in *Social Works*,<sup>18</sup> Nikolaus Müller-Schöll and Shannon Jackson seem to indicate that performing arts can, surely not without difficulty, be laboratories of thinking in common in actions, concepts and percepts. This also implies communal reflection on the conditions of thinking. Many articles indeed show how theater is a thought-project, not only in being conceptual but in its openness or confusion, so that the indeterminacy appeals to the thought processes of the spectator. But the openness can in itself set the audience's imagination into motion without putting its categories into question in a movement of sense that might exceed the already thought or imagined. The second question is to analyze how it is possible to promote a dialogical art with the spectator.<sup>19</sup>

16 Kai van Eikels: *Die Kunst des Kollektiven: Performance zwischen Theater, Politik und Sozio-Ökonomie*. Paderborn: Fink 2013.

17 Juliane Rebentisch, conference "Theater as a Scene of Thinking", at the symposium *Thinking on/of Stage*, September 28, 2013 at Künstlerhaus Mousonturm Frankfurt (not published yet).

18 Nikolaus Müller-Schöll (ed.): *Performing Politics: Politisch Kunst machen nach dem 20. Jahrhundert*. Berlin: Theater der Zeit 2012; Shannon Jackson: *Social Works. Performing Arts, Supporting Publics*. London: Routledge 2011.

19 This dialogical dimension of theater represents for Hans-Thies Lehmann an "aesthetics of response-ability" in postdramatic theater. See Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Postdramatic Theater*, trans. from the German by Karen Jürs-Munby. London /

Which forms of appeal to thinking might induce an excess of narcissistic thought? Such an opening movement to a form of ‘other of the thought’ that Bernhard Waldenfels calls responsivity,<sup>20</sup> implies a conscience of the movement, and self-reflectivity goes hand in hand with the sense that appears, a sense that would unfold in an in-between, as a result of the ‘common’. This kind of thinking may be linked to our common existence, our desires and investigations. It would exceed existing discourses and have an existential dimension – even more so, that it would involve the status of spectatorship in one form or another. Nevertheless, exceeding categories, objects and relations, always means to establish a reference to them. If a making-sense in common would be a laboratory of the in-common, how are the interrogations concerned with our relationships to others and our representations, how do they start from them – without confining us in a critical and defensive gesture? Or without letting us fall back into a mythologized co-presence? The activation of the spectator intended by multiple works has no doubt to be questioned on several levels: the symbolic level, the intersubjective level and the level of the sensible co-presence. The studies should also take into account the forms of spectatorial returns enabled by this activation, should they be critical, sensible or subjective.

Thus, this book focuses on three different points: the question of direct participation; the (co-)creation of the effects that emerge in theater situations – i. e. between stage and audience; and projects that work with different modes of partaking (*partage*) to question the preconditions of possible communities. The first part deals less with participation than with its being contested. The participatory projects that are presented are participations ‘under conditions’: in *X Apartments* studied by Katia Arfara, the penetration of daily but unfamiliar spaces in the Athenian outskirts is guided by a singular hearing and viewing, whereas the Iranian performances that Narges Hashempour introduces address different categories of people, so she identifies a form of collective identification which could as well occur in the most innovative and progressive works. Bernhard Siebert analyzes self-reflexive

New York: Routledge 2006, p. 185. He relates this to “a mutual implication of actors and spectators”, which would be “an experience [...] not only aesthetic but therein at the same time ethico-political” (ibid., p. 186).

20 For an introduction to Bernhard Waldenfels’ Analysis in *Antwortregister*, see Norm Friesen: Waldenfels’ Responsive Phenomenology of the Alien, 2014. <http://learningspaces.org/files/Waldenfels.pdf> (accessed April 22, 2017).

participation advanced by Kate McIntosh, while Gerald Siegmund singles out the pitfalls of participation and shows that also frontal set ups can prove to be very instructive for conceiving the dialogicity between a show and the spectators.

The second part concentrates on projects that are not participatory nor even interactive but create genuine structures of being-with. As Eva Holling and Eliane Beaufile underline, they can promote complex forms of relations with the spectators. Eva Holling shows how every theatrical encounter is intersubjective, giving rise to theatrical interpellation by different kinds of Lacanian transference or foiling it critically, whereas Eliane Beaufile re-examines particular movements of sense that are liberated because the usual modes of subject recognition are diverted. But a subject can experience the movement of being-with as world making, as the Nature Theater of Oklahoma does for Marie Vandembussche. Or one can grasp it through the difference in the text performances by very singular actors, who are invited by the British artists presented by Chloé Déchery to do so.

The third part deals with questions of 'communitification' in theatre – with forms of performance that wish to think and to act out togetherness and to negotiate the spectator's function from within. Stéphane Hervé presents many works which take care not to call for identification with the communities on stage, even at the expense of irritating spectators, whereas Isabelle Barbéris studies the critical dimension of polylogal or dissensual convivialities that are sketched out at the end of performances. Leon Gabriel highlights the awareness of *struction* in the works of Romeo Castellucci and Kate McIntosh. But being-with can also occur in the working groups of Marie Preston, whose unachieved videos of cooperation wish to interpellate non-group members.

Finally, Kai van Eikels reflects broadly on the bounds that may subsist, in the age of post-Fordism and a certain turmoil for artists, between artistic *poiesis* and strictly political *praxis*.

Between the sections, two interviews with 'polyphonic artists' also address the questions of being-with. Heiner Goebbels and Ivana Müller conceive theatrical works which are most of the time frontal but open the performative space to forms of co-creation with the spectators. In the interviews, they express their thoughts towards several 'beings-withs' on different levels in their artistic work.