

Theorizing Sound Writing

Edited by Deborah Kapchan

THEORIZING SOUND WRITING

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10. Almost Imperceptible Rhythms and Stuff Like That

The Power of Affect in Live Performance

“Almost imperceptible rhythms and stuff like that,” she said. For Portuguese choreographer Vera Mantero, this is what performers need to be listening to when attempting to maintain the interaction with the audience.

“These things are so minuscule that it is impossible to share among us [the performers] the same understanding, at each moment, of what is necessary to tighten that string, to keep hold of that thing,” she admitted.

“That’s a great image,” I replied enthusiastically. She laughed like only children can.

“It’s like there is a string connecting us to them, a string that we keep on pulling and stretching,” she added.

“I will quote you!” I continued. Vera giggled.

“Feel free to do so because that’s exactly what I feel in those performances. Really, really . . . We are there, they pick up one side of the string, we pick up the other, and there we go . . .,” she described. “We are doing the same work. We are all there, at the same time. If they let go of the string, well . . . we lose it,” she concluded.

Like her laughter, Mantero’s words are crystal clear. While the image of the string is imaginary, the activity of the audience is concrete: a negotiation of affect, tensions, and intensities that unfolds with the theatrical event, a point of tension permanently at risk of being lost. Mantero was referring to the type of engagement a production such as *Until the Moment When God Is Destroyed by*

the Extreme Exercise of Beauty (AQD)¹ demands from the audience. Although spectators are seated in a traditional auditorium facing the performers, what is asked from them does not follow the conventions of Western theater, according to which the stage is the place for action and the spectator a passive beholder. AQD performs a critique both of action as something to be seen and of the voyeuristic and passive role it prescribes to the spectator: scarcely any action will be seen on stage. Instead, the bodies of AQD carry out a *chorus of activities*,² a choreography of words displaying their sounding materiality in playful rhythmic patterns. This *performative construction*³ invites the audience to immerse itself in a cadence of sounds, challenging it to engage with the performance from an aural and, I will argue, an affective angle. AQD summons the audience to a particular kind of engagement with the performers on stage, an engagement that equates an exchange of affect with a practice of listening, rather than a production of effects. I will be claiming that this shift—from effects to affect—is a distinctive feature of contemporary performance that gestures toward a mode of intersubjectivity in the theater by which the performance lends itself to the affective impact of the audience.

AQD unfolds a practice of listening that challenges the audience to pick up and perhaps intensify patterns of rhythm initiated by the *choir of activities* performed on stage. Created by six guest dancers and Mantero herself, the production stages a situation of an apparent conversation with the spectators. Lined up at the front stage, the performers are almost as illuminated as the audience. Some of them smile; others seem to observe each spectator. They look happy, joyful. Their bodies are relaxed in their chairs, though attentive. Their costumes are extravagant, markers of individuality, whereas the words they say are the same. After a long silence, they lean forward and they ask, all at the same time: “Are we ready?” Pause. The way they speak is bizarre: they hold up each syllable (aaaare, weeeeeee, readyyyyyyy?) and pause heavily after each word. Breaking down the prosody of the English language, they make the familiar sound foreign. Despite its banal content, what they say doesn’t sound like a conversation at all. At first hearing, words are pronounced at the same time, but a more careful listening will show how heterophony creates a specific sound texture. Like an unfamiliar choir, they speak in a repetitive cadence, deliberately disarticulating the common pace of speech and introducing variations in pitch and melody that widen the acoustic fabric of the show. Hence, this choreographic score is enunciated in a deliberately slow rhythm, rigorously scripted with a strong musical and choreographic sense.⁴ It lays the foundations for the active and affective listening of the audience.

There is no theater without an audience.⁵ However, not only does the way we conceive of the audience vary from culture to culture—ranging widely from voyeurism to participation—but it also varies within the Western paradigm throughout historical periods and according to sociocultural values. This means that perception and the modes of shaping it also change, making theater a privileged site to examine it. In this text, I will focus on the Western theater paradigm inherited from the nineteenth century, that is, marked by a passive gaze and subjecting the spectator to theatrical effects. These premises—passive gaze and theatrical effects—imply an understanding of looking as passive and of the spectator as a mere repository of those effects. Not surprisingly, in postindustrial societies measures of discipline and control in theatrical institutions as well as demands of silence and concentration from regnant aesthetic paradigms shaped the *habitus* of the bourgeois spectator, who was rendered silent in the gloomy auditorium. Since the late nineteenth century, in particular, after Wagner's revolutionary concept of the "total artwork" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), the darkening of the auditorium has reinforced the separation between the spectator and the stage, improving strategies to optimize attention and produce effects in the audience. This became the norm for proscenium theater buildings and performances in the West and, not surprisingly, one of the targets of twentieth-century avant-garde provocations and aesthetic battles (both in the early decades and in the 1960s and 1970s). In addition, as these spatial and lighting technologies shaped the audience's perception, they reinforced an old idea: the audience as a single though collective entity that behaves, thinks, and feels the same. Eliding cultural, gendered, and individual differences, the conception of a unified audience has been critically addressed by authors who made clear that individual difference is key to understanding not only the implications of culture in reception (Bennett 1990), but also the processes of individual subjectivity within a collective entity or against an ideologically charged ideal of spectator (Dolan 1991; Auslander 2003; Rayner 2003). Acknowledging these critiques, I will therefore use the term *audience* in the sense of a collective made of singularities that by taking part in the performative event engage in a common process (Nancy 2000). Despite individual interpretations, thoughts, or feelings, I am interested in approaching here the background affective process that has an impact on the performance in which each spectator participates by the very singularity he or she brings to the theater room.

Theater is a privileged space in which to investigate hidden regions of individual and collective interactions through the relationship between performers and

audience. Live performance happens mostly in the encounter between spectators and actors bringing forth a reciprocal dynamic that exceeds the logic of dramatic effects. This intangible dimension is often mystified as the *magic of theater*, or vaguely defined as a *flow of energy*. In a recent publication, theater academic Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) suggests that the encounter between actors and spectators is, in various ways, a distinctive feature of the new performative paradigm initiated with performance art. According to Fischer-Lichte, the performative paradigm has restored the centrality of the reciprocity between actors and spectators to producing the theatrical encounter as interactivity unfolds in a *feedback loop* that produces the materiality of performance:

In short, whatever the actors do elicits a response from the spectators, which impacts on the entire performance. In this sense, performances are generated and determined by a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop. Hence, performance remains unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 38)

Despite her scientific purposes, Fischer-Lichte can hardly describe how that process happens in the concrete examples she gives without iterating the same mystifying vocabulary that pervades Western theater history. Contradicting her ambition of developing a vocabulary for the *aesthetics of the performative*, more often than not we are thrown back to the domain of emission, transference, and absorption of energy. The term itself remains intentionally unclear for, as the author reckons, *the immediacy of the perceptual experience* is insurmountable (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 211n11). Surely, what needs to be questioned is the method of thinking and writing about this specific perceptual experience. Such a concrete and vital feature of live performance demands a critical approach. This is where sound writing can provide an alternative pathway, a methodology to grasp and translate the experience of partaking in a live performance. I interrogate the dynamics of that relationship through the lens of affective listening. Claiming that affect, like listening, has a performative power that produces the ontological difference of live events, I will reassess the traditional conception of the audience as passive while finding words to name felt dimensions of performance. Affective listening is listening with the whole body to reverberations of the rhythms and intensities of performance, to a felt dimension where one can be touched (or not). This is what Deborah Kapchan defines in the introduction as “sound knowledge,” a listening composed of felt echoes propagating within and without the skin. Writing affective listening—sound knowledge—is an attempt to get

closer to the pressure, temperature, and vibrations of live performance's touch-stone: touching, moving, resonating. Sound writing is the theoretical possibility of writing through such touch, making it reverberate in sound-words that echo sound-affect. As such, sound writing is an affective listening as well as a way of knowing how the performers and audience are touched. It performs the affective resonance of my experience in the performing arts.

My theoretical framework confronts contemporary theories of the transmission of affect with vocabulary used by performers to describe their encounters with audiences in order to rearticulate paradoxical aspects inherent to the theatrical event, especially those related to the sensorial experience it involves. Like the word *theory*, the Greek word for auditorium (*theatron*) is deeply rooted in the sense of vision that has overruled other sensorial layers of the theatrical experience. To see and to be seen is the hegemonic rule of theater in the Western canon, even though an emphasis on sound and the conditions of listening, rather than on vision, has long been key to theater architecture (Vitruvius n.d.). The privileged hierarchy of vision in relation to other senses in the theatrical experience mirrors the top position it occupies in Western culture, thought, and philosophy since its birth: seeing equals knowing and knowing equals consciousness and rationality. Yet, as many authors have argued, theatergoing is an embodied experience in which vision is just a part of a whole sensorial engagement (Bleeker 2011; Welton 2012; Di Benedetto 2010), and in which the whole sensorium is actively engaged. As Banes and Lepecki remind us, the senses are historically and culturally determined dimensions of experience that draw lines between *the perceptible and the imperceptible*, defining a *political economy of the senses*:

The political economy of the senses subjacent to any system of presence, to any system of power, by casting a dividing line between the property perceptible and the imperceptible impacts on the ontological and political status of any perception by defining it as significant or as insignificant. (Lepecki and Banes 2007, 3)

What we need to realize when thinking about the spectator as an ontological condition is that, side by side with a politics of the senses, each performance as well as the bodies on stage engender a politics of affect that claims examination. Furthermore, perception in general, and looking in particular, cannot be easily dismissed today as passive. This conception has been radically revised in the past decades by the work of scientists such as Alain Berthoz or philosophers

such as Alva Nöe, who advocate for perception as action—Berthoz (1997) sustains perception as simulated action in the brain, and Nöe (2004) argues that perceiving the work is already acting upon it and thinking it. Thus, science and arts scholarship seem to be reaching a conclusion that musicians, actors, or dancers intuitively know from experience: every audience participates in live performance events albeit in different degrees according to their own cultural, historical, and aesthetic conventions.

Yet, if the presence of the spectator is crucial to performance's ontology, his or her activity is rarely examined. In this chapter, I argue that the activity of the spectator involves an intensification and amplification of affect, enabling a moving together, a reciprocal movement between stage and audience. This movement, in turn, will be conceptualized as a *co-motion* that takes place through a specific kind of listening—an affective resonance. By influencing the quality of the event, that is, the charged, circulating, and fleeting affective quality of live performance, commotion produces the ontological difference of theater. I suggest that emotions, thoughts, or sensations carry affect, that is, sensitive charges or felt intensities that circulate in social spaces.

PATTERNS OF AFFECT TRANSMISSION

Fraught and slippery in meaning, these terms need further clarification. Indeed, we barely have words to refer to them because affect remains the underbelly of felt phenomena. Affects are concrete felt things that belong to our experience, such as feeling uncomfortable or suffocated when one enters a room. They are neither categorical emotions nor proprioceptive states of awareness of oneself. Since Darwin's research on human and animal emotions, they tend to be described as universals, categories of felt experience (joy, sadness, etc.) deeply entangled with the body's physiology. Despite its usefulness in understanding the intertwined processes of the body and the psyche, as Silvan Tomkins's work about emotion as a primary motivational drive suggests, inspiring the seminal work of Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995), these categories fail to give us instruments to think about more subtle and shifting qualities of experience. This is why affect, either as capacity of attachment to things, people, ideas, activities, or institutions free of constraints (Sedgwick 2003, 19) or as a flux, an intensity ungraspable by consciousness (that is not "captured" by the various systemic processing modes of the body) advanced by Massumi (1995) and other Deleuzians, has been granted such a rapturous reception in the academy, in particular, in the field of affect studies.

Subtle felt phenomena are more accurately described as affective impressions attached to emotions, thoughts, or sensations, hence, charging or intensifying social environments. Affective impressions can be conscious or unconscious in the sense that their meaning emerges through felt experience. One might not be rationally aware in the moment or even able to articulate it in words, but it still is a meaningful part of the experience. Making distinctions between affect, emotion, and feeling is challenging. As the editors of a groundbreaking publication bridging sound and affect put it, “The question, though, is never really what affect means but what it does” (Thompson and Biddle 2013, 18). Conceiving of affect as attached to emotions, thoughts, or sensations enables us to distinguish it from the latter and to enhance a description of its movement (and transmission) as circulating and performative particles that do things. For the purpose of this chapter, I will use the term *affect* to refer to sensitive charges that circulate in social spaces, intensifying them through the transmission of *patterns of rhythm*. Despite the common negative implications, charges are that which can be carried, transported, and set in circulation: “burdens,” say those who feel charges as weight; “intensifiers,” say those who feel charges as a potentiality for transmission. *To charge* means to act upon the surplus qualities of feeling, activating a movement that takes place in and heightens social spaces. This is clear if we think of this movement as the wind, the rain, or the sunshine that activates a certain kind of atmosphere in a social space. Affects of sadness can charge a funeral, as well as affects of enthusiasm intensify a soccer match. In the theater, this movement takes place between performers and audience members. Their reciprocal influence on the weather in the theater space affects the outcome of the performance. As Mantero states, this engagement is a permanent and subtle negotiation of the tension with which performers and spectators hold a string—this tension is the intensifier of the felt quality of the performance, of its movement.

Not surprisingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that *affect* is also a “disposition toward mental or emotional states,” thus, a possibility of being affected that comes together with assumptions about mobility or crystallization. As long as they are fluctuating and temporary, mental or emotional dispositions are a sign of health. On the contrary, if those dispositions become crystallized in more permanent bodily states, they indicate illness. In understanding affect as sensitive charges or felt intensities, I am, therefore, stressing the ideas of circulation and participation, and of how those processes allow us to highlight ontological aspects of theater in culturally charged scenarios. I will anchor this approach in three main authors. The theories of Teresa Brennan (2004) on

the transmission of affect provide a broad framework for my argument. To further elaborate on the concept of affect and its processes, I will draw upon the connections between affect and sound, by means of vibration as a model for understanding transmission suggested by Julian Henriques (2010) and the concept of vitality affects as proposed by Daniel Stern (1985).

A WHOLE-BODY LISTENING

Live performance phenomena, in particular, those related to ways of connecting stage and audience, are historically grounded and culturally informed. Indebted to performance art's groundbreaking strategies to dismiss representation, postdramatic theater paved the way for intensified encounters between performers and audiences. According to the well-known concept elaborated by Hans Thies-Lehmann, postdramatic practices generated a shift in the mode of perception of live events (Thies-Lehmann 2006, 16). Instead of the linear narrative structure, based on the logic of the dramatic text, the spectator is confronted with simultaneous, fragmentary, and ambivalent discourses, ascribed to the audiovisual pervasiveness in globalized societies. Likewise, as opposed to traditional drama, postdramatic theater shifted the focus of dialogue and action from the stage—between characters performed by actors on stage—to a “theater situation” established with the audience (Lehmann 2006, 17). Self-reflexive and critical, this openness urges us to rethink the power of affect in performance. In other words, postdramatic theater's shift in perception reinforces the potential vulnerability of live performance to affect and be affected. But how can we assess this reciprocal movement?

Philosopher and social theorist Teresa Brennan has developed a theory that gives a provocative insight into the transmission of affect in the theater. Recuperating a philosophical tradition of passions as emotional states that circulate and visit us, Brennan claims that emotions are not ours. Rather, they result from an intersubjective exchange with the environment and the others. Social in nature, the transmission of affect impacts the biology of the body as, for Brennan, affect is *the physiological shift accompanying a judgment* (Brennan 2004, 5). The author emphasizes the materiality of affects and how they, on the one hand, differ from feelings because they cannot be captured in words and, subsequently, be discerned, and on the other hand, do not differ entirely from emotions (Brennan 2004, 6).⁶ Contrary to the current positivist conception of emotions as expressions of a self-contained body, Brennan argues that we

are open beings who receive signals from and emit signals to others and to the environment, perceived by the senses and therefore materialized in our physiology. The biological limits of the body do not contain our identity. Like the skin, the membranes of our existence are porous. Thus, Brennan's theory breaks through the limits of the body as the original site of emotions and container of identities, challenging the borders between the social and the biological as well as between the individual and the environment.

Interestingly, transmission is an equally pressing figure in describing sound behavior. In his historical approach to sound in the avant-garde, Douglas Kahn proposes a figure of transmission to account for new conceptual possibilities for understanding the relation between sound and space in the wake of technological innovations of the late nineteenth century. Transmission space, Kahn alleges, allows disembodied sounds to travel across the globe, enabling them to exist in two places at the same time, set apart by wired silence. Emitted and received throughout long distances, sound becomes a travelling signal (Kahn 1992, 20). Unlike the figure of vibration and inscription (recorded sound), transmission not only explains how invisible sounding phenomena can propagate through a medium (space, bodies), but also how it dissolves recurring issues of mysticism or religious spirituality in sound and music discourses in the West.

In a recent approach, however, Julian Henriques recuperates vibrations and their propagation process as a useful model to explain fleeting affective shifts occurring between bodies in social spaces (Ridout 2008; Goodman 2010; Thompson and Biddle 2013). In his "rhythmanalysis" of a dancehall scene in Kingston (Jamaica), Henriques defines vibrations as an energetic or rhythmic pattern that propagates through mediums in different wave bands: corporeal (bodily kinetics), material (solids, liquids, and gas, including electromagnetic fields), and sociocultural (Henriques 2010, 59). Immersed in all these different wave bands, reciprocally contaminating each other, human beings relate and connect affectively in similar ways as vibrations flow and propagate rhythmic patterns. Both sound and affect are events that flow in a given rhythmic frequency and are felt haptically as intensities. They are, suggests the author, a "whole-body vibrotactile experience" (Henriques 2010, 78). In Henriques's account of affect transmission in the dancehall, he considers, however, that like sound, affect waves can be measured. His account proposes measuring rhythms as frequency, intensity as amplitude, and timbre as a distinctive quality of both sound and affect. The author further suggests that listening is a "connective relationship" (Henriques 2010, 76); listening with "all the senses"—a whole-body listening,

one can say—is the adequate mode of approaching and grounding affective experience and transmission. Although equating sound and affect implies the puzzling proposition that affect can be measured, which is not my claim whatsoever, Henriques's insightful analysis can be helpful to understanding processes of affect transmission in live performance.

COMMOTION: WHEN THE SOCIAL IMPACTS THE AESTHETIC

To make sense of affect transmission in the theater, it is useful to think of this kind of listening as affective listening, a rhythmic resonance that enhances the amplification of affect in the relationship between stage and audience. According to Henriques's model, if amplification (of volume) equals intensification (of feeling or felt experience), then it is plausible to think that the audience's affective listening to a live performance, despite individual interpretations, expectations, and feelings, sets in motion and amplifies/intensifies rhythmic patterns or vibration frequencies initiated by the performance. This impacts the sensitive quality of the performance—its timbre—making each performance an affectively and aesthetically unique event. This sensitive quality or timbre expresses itself in a particular movement: commotion of resonant dynamic patterns, emitting and receiving material, corporeal, and sociocultural signals from the wave bands in which performers and spectators are immersed. Hence, as I will suggest below, the role of the audience in live performance is that of an intensifier of the sensitive quality of the performance, engaging in a co-motion of rhythms, a moving together like a vibrational flow. As in Brennan's theory, Henriques's model allows us to think beyond the self-contained individual. But unlike Brennan, it does not privilege physioneurological processes (such as entrainment in the propagation of hormones and pheromones in social spaces) but rhythmic patterns or frequencies as embodied cultural practices that are haptically felt. Although intensities in the theater space cannot be measured in the same way as sound vibrations in a dancehall, the vibration model seems to hint at good chances of dismissing the magic of live performance by showing the importance of listening to affective transmissions.

In the theater, the process of the transmission of affect has further implications. The ontological status of theatrical elements displayed on stage is paradoxical. Making the case for the dancer, Portuguese philosopher José Gil reminds us that the body on stage is paradoxical: bodies on stage are and they are not the bodies

of actors and performers (2001, 57). Either representing characters or performing tasks in real time, they share a dual materiality that consists of its aesthetic material. According to Gil, as long as there is an affective investment in the body, it becomes paradoxical (Gil 2001, 58). It generates a space of intensities or what he identifies as a *space of the body*:

Here, we would like to consider the body no longer as a “phenomenon,” no longer as a visible and concrete perception moving in the objective Cartesian space, but rather, we would like to consider the body as a meta-phenomenon, simultaneously visible and virtual, a cluster of forces, a transformer of space and time, both emitter of signs and trans-semiotic, endowed by an organic interior ready to be dissolved as soon as it reaches the surface. (Gil 2006, 28, trans. André Lepecki)

Although I am not assuming the collapse of subject/object borders that such a Deleuzian-informed approach would imply, in an affective and poetic dimension, the audience is one with the work because of the paradoxical status of the body on stage. This is crucial to understanding how a theory of the transmission of affect can highlight the activity of the audience as an intensification or amplification of affect as sound knowledge. The audience is affected by the performance as much as it impacts the dual reality of the body, via its physiological shifts, states, and felt experience.

The audience gathered to attend a performance brings in an affective mood. Regardless of individual thoughts and feelings, a collective process of affective intensification takes place. Transmitting and receiving affect, the audience determines a social environment that has material consequences in physiological states, both in the body of the spectator and in the body of the performer. In this light, borders between biology and aesthetics are challenged. In many contemporary performances, such as Vera Mantero's, the logic of producing emotional effects on the audience recedes, cracking open the impact of the audience. In *AQD*, the choreographic and musical script creates patterns of rhythms and intensities, a sonic space that invites to hypnotic or trancelike states. It needs to be listened to, not seen. As meaning and narrative are suspended by means of a repetitive cadence, the emotional effects of its enunciation on the audience are not predetermined. One is not supposed to feel happy or sad. Instead, one is allowed to engage affectively with affects emerging during the performance. Thus, the circulation of those affects—the intensifying charges of spectators' felt experience—is left open by states of distraction and dispersion

induced by the performance. What can they disclose? Agitation, annoyance, irritation, restlessness, impatience, and boredom as much as diversion, reverie, dreaminess, absorption, lightness, and laughter. These contradictory affects intensify the atmosphere in the theater, giving room both to individual responses and collective movements. We listen to the movement in *AQD* because we listen to its affective gesturing. In the social process of becoming an audience, spectators become whole-body listeners of these gestures, which impact the bodies of performers on stage, therefore influencing the outcome of the performance.

What I am claiming is that affect, like Kapchan's "listening act" (2016, this volume), is performative: it does something to the poetic encounter, to the bodies and to the sensitive qualities we experience in a live performance. Affect is the "stuff" commotion is made of. This performativity cannot be disentangled from the presence of the audience implicated in the affective materiality generated as the performance unfolds. To our great advantage, we can conceive of it as an affective resonance, listening to rhythms that can be felt through movement or by "movements of attention," as Martin Welton (2012) puts it in his recent volume *Feeling Theatre*. Welton suggests that, "In watching or performing theatre, we undertake practices of perception which are founded in certain kinds of movement—of visual or aural attention for example—and in doing so, we get a feel of how it goes" (Welton 2012, 3).

AFFECTIVE RESONANCE

I now focus on these movements of "aural attention." Rearticulating the engagement of the audience with the stage as an affective resonance, I claim that the movement of commotion intertwines listening and affect. In her essay "The Audience. Subjectivity, Community and the Ethics of Listening," Alice Rayner considers the audience as an *act of giving* itself to listening (Rayner 2003, 265), as in the linguistic expression "giving audience." Rayner suggests that the gift is the premise that distinguishes a judging audience from a giving audience. Brought forth by listening, the act of judging is grounded in authority, whereas the act of the giving audience is grounded in affects. The act of listening is defined as giving reception, as *an act of kindness* (265), for it opens itself to the flow of meanings between speaker and listener (264). Rayner emphasizes the affective nature of listening as a gift that grants an exchange of meaning in the theater. Yet there are no gifts without exchange, as Marcel Mauss (1967) famously argued. If we consider the gift of listening as an affective resonance that, like

sound resonance, sounds again, amplifying felt phenomena, we can understand how the audience's attention can be *in tension* with the performers, thus moving with them. As a practice of listening, affective resonance can be thought of as the mechanism of affective mobilization that combines degrees of tension and attention, or of looseness and distraction, re-affecting the stage. This repetition does not entail feeling or thinking the same impressions, emotions, sensations, or thoughts, but sharing a common potentiality of individuals to engage with a resonant movement and be moved by it, through an (in)tense listening. Precisely because affect is a circulating charge and not a synonym for emotion or feeling, we are able to differentiate the performative potentiality of affect at play in an audience's activity.

Considering "affective resonance" as a mode of tension and attention, we can conceive of the audience as an active counterpart in live events. While allowing individual difference of feeling and interpretation, affective resonance is a collective state of tension that suspends the performance in a movement of affects as it lends itself to listening. Specifically, I am suggesting that this tension constitutes the means by which the audience heightens affective forces that sustain the delicate architecture of performance. Like geodesic domes, invented by American engineer Buckminster Fuller, performances need "tensigrity." *Tensigrity* consists of a systemic relation that describes a state of integrity resulting from an invisible tension that sustains it (Fuller 1975). Working together with forces of compression, tension guarantees the construction's flexibility and internal cohesion. Fuller's dome requires this systemic relation of opposing forces of compression and tension: its integrity depends on and results from the state of tension created by compression. Likewise, a performance requires an element of continuous tension created, at its inception, by its own movement. A collective atmosphere of affects, set into a reciprocal motion, is the conflicting force that grants the performance's integrity and dynamic, through affective resonance.

As I have suggested, thinking of the audience as a gift of listening and thinking of listening as an affective exchange might bring us to an interesting point of audition to understand how affects are crucial to performance. By means of what I call an "affective resonance," the audience sets affects in circulation and amplifies them, producing performance's constitutive difference or sensitive quality—commotion.

Considering that the average spectator attends a production once, whereas an actor or a dancer performs it repeatedly, it is the latter who is more likely to experience that difference. Performers, not the audience, have access to the

affective nuances of a show. When Mantero envisages a string being stretched and connecting audience and performers, she is acknowledging a state of tension that is negotiated as a felt thing, an affect, an “imperceptible rhythm.” As Daniel Stern reminds us, there is a specific quality of experience that has to do with the ways by which we experience abstract properties such as shape, intensity, motion, number, and rhythm. This experience involves “vitality affects that we experience as dynamic shifts or patterned changes within ourselves” (Stern 1985, 54). Stern sustains that they belong to the realm of affective experience, but since they do not fit emotional categories (such as joy or sadness), these elusive properties are better expressed through a kinetic vocabulary (a rush, a burst, a fleeting experience) (Stern 1985, 54).

DISCERNING AFFECT AS SOUND KNOWLEDGE

In the realm of my present investigation on the power of affect in contemporary performance, I have been undertaking several conversations with performers, dancers, and actors. I wanted to understand how their perception of the audience influenced the way they perform since what happens in the encounter is commonly recognized as a concrete and undeniable imperative of live performance. At first, these conversations happened rather spontaneously. I talked mostly to friends or people I met during my research periods in Portugal and abroad. Yet they turned out to be a thrilling source of inspiration. In the past two years, I have collected words and expressions from over fifty performers from mainly Portugal, Brazil, and the United States, and a few from other European countries. As subjective as this material can be, it nonetheless provided me with crucial insights about my topic.

From these conversations, I could observe four clear strategies of expressing such ineffable qualities of experience regarding the engagement with an audience: onomatopoeia, sensorial vocabulary, metaphors, and bodily gestures. First, performers use onomatopoeia to signal a relation of potency, power, or weakness of the patterns of dynamic established in the affective relation with the audience. Mimetic reproduction of sounds to express ways of feeling shows how close intensities are to amplitudes of sound vibration and, therefore, to listening (as affective resonance) on the one hand, and on the other hand, how that affective resonance demands to break through the linguistic categories of signification to be expressed (cf. Weiss 2008). American dancer and choreographer Miguel Gutierrez, for instance, perceives the gaze of the audience as bodily awareness,

an “awakening of parts of the body” (background texture of the recording: cars, motorbikes, honking). He translates that intensity with an onomatopoeia: “It’s like literally the actual side of my body that is facing you starts to have a kind of WINGWINGWING thing, that becomes awake if it’s like an audience on one side situation.” Words don’t seem to accurately describe such felt experience as the quick rhythmic high sound of WINGWINGWING, as something that hits and uplifts you, as something that tickles your body as if with an invisible stick. Like many other performers, Gutierrez’s use of onomatopoeia shows how it can break through limited word semantics by further highlighting the adequacy of sound to express affective experience.

Second, a sensorial vocabulary pervades the ways by which the audience makes itself present to performers. The feedback from the audience can be described as the “silence in the room,” the feeling of the “temperature,” of “smoothness” or “rigidity,” a sense of proximity or distance, connection or disconnection, a sense of expansion or contraction. Like sound, the affective relationship between performers and spectators stands out as a whole-body experience. Australian dancer and actor Anton Skrzypiciel claims that there is an intensity that surrounds him: “When you feel like a show is going badly it’s almost like somebody deflated a balloon, like all the air left . . . whereas when people are engaged, you feel like the air pressure is slightly more intense on you, it surrounds you [with] that intensity.” This intensity, they argue, is a multidirectional or 360-degree perception, and it can be negotiated. German dancer and performer Eva Meyer-Keller describes her attitude in the solo performance *Death Is Certain*: “I don’t look at them, I don’t smile at them, but I can sense the presence in the room. I can sense their movement and how loud and silent it is. If it’s too serious or too stiff, I try to shake it up. It’s very subtle.”⁷

Third, in line with these expressions, metaphors of rhythm are frequent: performers describe their connection with the audience as a wave that goes back and forth, a common breath, a pulsing heart. Theater actor Tony Torn uses the metaphor of the ocean to describe the energy flow (what I call here “circulation of affect”) in live performance: “The energy flows off the stage into the audience, it recycles and comes surging back, so it’s like the ocean. The wave goes crashing and then it is sucked back . . . so when it’s happening like this you feel like there is this give and take, a suction and then a wave, a suction and then a wave. When you don’t feel like the audience is with you is when this sucking, this undertoe feeling of the ocean is coming out that the wave is not coming back at you. You just feel a drain.”⁸ (I recall: morning light, people talking, smell of coffee, music.)

These metaphors describe vibrations as defined by Henriques, patterns of rhythm that propagate in various wave bands (corporeal, material, and sociocultural). Despite the subjectivity of each personal narrative, these strategies clearly indicate a common semantic ground: a sensual perception of rhythm that involves states of tension, in short, a movement of commotion.

Finally, commotion is inscribed in the bodies of the performers. When words fail them, bodies simulate movement. Rarely aware of those gestures, they magnify their felt experience by shaking their hands or swinging their torso back and forth while speaking. The rhythms of affect go under the skin of the performers. Since words cannot fully express the felt quality of the experience, performers embody the movement of commotion when recalling it from memory. Though “almost imperceptible,” the ineffable rhythm enacted by the movement of affect sinks in the performer beyond the ephemeral experience of being onstage as “whole-body” listening, which stays with the performer as a resonating intensity.

CONCLUSION

A performance such as Vera Mantero’s *Until the Moment* confronts the audience with a saturated visual image; when the only action and movement is performed by the voice, by the words spoken as a sort of hypnotic and distractive repetitive litany without a narrative or logic to them, the audience is challenged to suspend the need to understand and to simply let go, moving together with the affective rhythm underlying the aural materiality of speech. These are sounding words produced and *listened through* bodies onstage and in the audience. Writing such experience takes up the challenge of translating the layers of reverberation that mark the skin as traces of the affective felt dimension of performance. Sound writing proves to be particularly stimulating and adequate when thinking of performances such as AQD that, instead of aiming at affecting the audience, give room to being together with the spectators, allowing them to feel and think alongside it.

NOTES

1. The première was in Brest, France, in 2006.
2. Vera Mantero, in her project notes.
3. Ibid.
4. Vera Mantero’s guest performers in this production are trained dancers. In an interview published in the program notes for the *Festival d’Automne*, Mantero describes

the text as a “musical and choreographic score,” rather than a conversation with the audience (Mantero and David 2006).

5. *Theater* is used here as a broad-spectrum term.

6. Although Brennan starts off by acknowledging this, she will use the term *affect* to designate negative ones. According to the author, negative affects need to be discerned by means of love as *living attention*. This is the bedrock of the paradigm of subjectivity she sees fit to cope with the increasingly violent and toxic global economies we live in (Brennan 2004, 22).

7. Eva Meyer-Keller, personal communications with the author.

8. *Ibid.*

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