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IDENTIFYING AND TRANSFORMING HABITS WITH CONTEMPORARY THEATRE PRACTICES

My doctoral research project sets out with the notion that theatre pedagogy shows its full potential when it takes the form of a collaborative practice that ties together the everyday surroundings of its participants and the transformative aspects of the artistic process. Theatre practice can be a central site for learning, critical evaluation, and democratic deliberation, taking into account the aesthetic qualities present in all thought and feeling but magnified in art. The main questions of this research are: (1) how can theatre practices allow participants to identify habits that they would like to transform or replace, and (2) how can collaborative theatre processes be used to create and enact more satisfactory habits. The artistic outcomes of this research will also answer the question, what kind of theatre ensues if the new habits developed in the introduced processes are carried out in the performance situation.

Background for the project

As a discipline, art pedagogy concerns people's interaction and experiences in situations where art is present, and produces new knowledge and better practices through practice.¹ A distinction could be made between two emphases within theatre pedagogy: one focusing on teaching the skills of expression traditionally valued in theatre, and the

¹ Anttila et al. 2011, 7.

other on the collective experience and learning with and about art.² The research outlined here is situated under the second emphasis with its focus less on the art of acting and more on the harnessing of the potential of theatre in creating interventions in one's surroundings and cultivating collaboration and sharing. Moreover, the three artistic processes planned as the basis of this research share many features with participatory art and community theatre. The former can articulate the unarticulated in everyday life and offer utopias that suggest transformation with alternative ways of being.³ Typical features of community theatre include peering into the participants' actual lives and the powers affecting them, creating alternative situations, and using theatrical form to nurture reflection.⁴

The theoretical background of this research incorporates John Dewey's notions of experience, learning, and inquiry. Dewey held that our action is based on *habits* which refer to the active means of modifying the social and material conditions as well as our passive adaptations to those conditions. These habits refer to patterns of concrete action as well as beliefs.⁵ In Dewey's view, the process of revising old habits is that of *inquiry*. It gets its impetus from a pre-cognitive disruption, an indeterminate situation that unsettlingly casts doubt on our belief. Habits are rarely questioned as long as they seem to serve us. Doubt arises through experiential factors when the aesthetic qualities underlining our experience are disrupted. This prompts inquiry.⁶ Inquiry begins when the situation is recognised as problematic. When the problem is carried to a solution, a new habit is formed.⁷ Maintaining *plasticity* allows us to revise and acquire habits - to learn - throughout our lives. Deliberately seeking indeterminacies to cast doubt on our habits is key for the continuation of

2 Ventola 2005, 20-21.

3 Haapalainen 2018, 21, 36-44.

4 Sederholm 2000, 113-115; Ventola 2013, 49-53.

5 Dewey 1916, 52-57; [1922] 1988, 15-16; Johnson 2017, 39-42; 2018, 36-37.

6 Bergman 2016, 183-184; Dewey [1910] 1978, 186-190; [1930] 1984, 244-249; Luntley 2016, 12-18.

7 Dewey [1910] 1978, 188; [1938] 1986, 11-15.

learning. Furthermore, it is a typical mindset for an artist teasing out problems for their potentiality in artistic creation.⁸

In this research, art practices are recognised as beneficial as they cause indeterminate situations but also offer solutions. Following Michael Luntley, problematic situations can be solved by applying concepts but also by using playful, aesthetic improvisation.⁹ The pragmatist perspective on knowledge also complements the view often found in the arts. The knowledge produced in arts is not definite but is rather tied to the knowing subject. It is constructed through situational embodied actions with one receiving and interpreting the other's experiences through the means of the arts.¹⁰ Rejecting the mind-body dichotomy, pragmatists view knowing as an experiential activity rather than the end product of cognition.¹¹ Knowledge is constantly revised in the process of inquiry, and it is both situational and fallibilistic in nature.¹²

Outline of the artistic processes

Throughout the artistic processes of this research, different groups will try out theatre practices and detail their experiences about them in regard to their habits. Some of the theatre practices experimented with will be historical, for example, the *dérive* journeying of the Letterist International¹³; some will be those chanced upon in my master's thesis project centred around the pragmatist notion of disruption¹⁴; and some will be created in the artistic processes outlined here. Some early experiments - for example keeping track of one's habits for 15 minutes in one's everyday surroundings and then

8 Dewey 1916, 44-48, 52-59; 1934, 15; Hildreth 2011, 34.

9 Luntley 2016, 65-69.

10 Anttila 2011, 153, 170-171.

11 Johnson 2017, 166-167; 2018, 104-106.

12 Field, n.d.

13 See Pyhtilä 2005, 53.

14 See Siren 2018.

visually mapping out those habits - suggest that people recognise habits easily. This can lead to a somewhat reaffirming sensation, but a longer process seems necessary to pinpoint habits that the participant might consider problematic and decide to attempt to replace or transform. Many implementations of participatory theatre that attempt to solve the participant's real-life problems exist, most notably perhaps the forms elaborated by Augusto Boal as part of his Theatre of the Oppressed.¹⁵ However, the research outlined here will not attempt to test a specific form of theatre in relation to the participants' habits. Instead, the collaborative practices used will be shaped by the process itself. Similarly, how the performances will be carried out will be decided primarily by how the new habits themselves can be carried out - the performance being an enactment of those habits rather than their representation. This idea extends to performing itself: instead of conveying the findings through means traditionally associated with acting, the participants' habits might lead them to perform in other ways, whatever those may be, or to create situations for the audience-participant to perform in.

While still in its early days, I have planned for my research project to include three artistic processes. The first process focuses on autobiographical theatre and our habits of telling personal stories. Even though I have created autobiographical works in the past, I originally did not see why that would be a viable frame for research - due to, simply, how commonplace personal narratives had become. After all, even though the history of autobiographical theatre is political, especially in presenting experiences of women and sexual and gender minorities¹⁶, we now live in what could be called "confessional times" with possibilities to create autobiographical content having become increasingly abundant, especially online.¹⁷ However, while theatre has become focused on the actual situation between the performer and the audience member in lieu of crafting fictive worlds¹⁸,

15 See Boal [1974] 2008, 97-120.

16 See Heddon 2008, 20-52.

17 Heddon 2008, 158-162.

18 See Fischer-Lichte 2008, 20-23.

an autobiographical work today could focus on its own fictitiousness, shedding light on how personal narratives are expected to be constructed in our contemporary Finnish society. This process could juxtapose a participant's singular first-person account with the collective devising the hypothetical consequences of that narrative for the participant's surroundings. On a topical note, this friction between the individual and the social might bring up questions of the new habits that we have all had to adopt in these particular circumstances under the ongoing pandemic.

The second artistic process will focus on gender minorities - people who are transgender, non-binary, agender, questioning and so on - and the habits in which we express and embody our genders or lack of them. As a member of this community, I have often felt that performances that have been created with the topic of gender diversity in mind aim at being "informative". The performances are not necessarily for me, but for an assumed audience member who is not a member of the community - and to whom certain experiences or aspects of the topic are then explained, in terms that might feel auxiliary and extraneous to the work of art at hand.¹⁹ My research aims to investigate what kind of theatre unfolds if the participants simply inhabit their gender on stage without having to answer expectations from the cisgender society. Could theatre practices reveal habits that have been learnt as an answer to the prevalent gender norms, and could theatre be the place to reimagine those habits to serve the individual better?

The third artistic process would harness the findings of the previous collaborations and focus on individuals creating artistic interventions in their typical surroundings. These interventions, designed to provoke new habits in the social environments in question, could point to ways in which art practices promote problem solving and community engagement - and continue to remind us of the aesthetic potential in our everyday situations.

19 Compare with Jill Dolan's notion that the theatre spectator is assumed to be of the dominant culture, mainly, white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male. [1988] 2012, 1.

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