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Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 2014–2015. Promotional print for *Manifesto*, 13-channel film installation, colour, 2-channel sound, shot on HD, aspect ratio 16:9, loop, 12 x 10min 30sec and 1 x 4min. Edition 6 + 4 patrons editions + 2 artist proofs. Courtesy Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney.

‘ACTING’ AS A MOTIF AND A VEHICLE IN VISUAL ARTS

GAUTHIER LESTURGIE

Actors are frequently present in the work of visual artists, albeit often unnoticed as such, or even denied. They, whether it be the artists themselves or extras, have an ambiguous position. Indeed, the Actor playing a role in an art piece is rarely an object of reflection, despite occurring in a discipline which constantly analyses the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of each of its components. In other words, many works of visual art use a ‘thing’—often the *medium* itself—while, at the same time, producing discourses about it and/or the category it belongs to. The prefix *meta-* could apply here in order to describe this tactic. As an example, the written language

being used precisely to write about written language. Though it is needless to enumerate favoured meta-thematics which assume this dual purpose within the visual arts—to be at once an effective medium, as well as a motif being reflected upon—the most obvious example is certainly the body itself. While the number of acting parts seem to increase in contemporary visual arts’ expressions with the production of videos, films, and performance-related works, the acting body often remains nothing other than its primary purpose: a vehicle, and is rarely discussed as an acting about acting, namely a *meta-acting*.

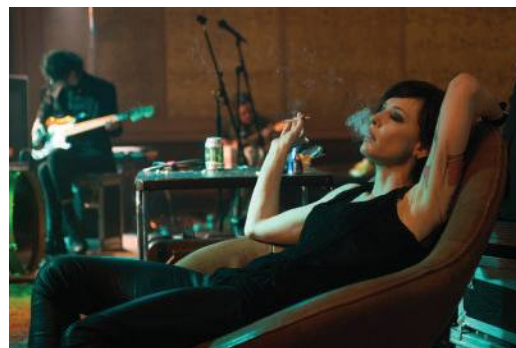


The term 'acting' is polysemous and comes with a variety of definitions. However, I am referring to the performing arts in which an actor realises a character, fictional or not, commonly for the stage, for motion pictures, for television or for radio.

This ignored place where the acting operates in visual arts is easily understandable in light of a certain aspect of western art history. A somewhat traditional and established position considers theatre as being in opposition to visual arts. It assumes that the 'fake' is inherent in theatre, where emotions 'are not real', while visual arts, and notably its performance disciplines, are

'true reality'. A statement from the renowned performance artist Marina Abramović during a conversation with Robert Ayers in 2010 is particularly indicative,

Theater is fake: there is a black box, you pay for a ticket, and you sit in the dark and see somebody playing somebody else's life. The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite : the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real. It's a very different concept. It's about true reality.¹



clockwise from top: Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 2014/2015. Installation view, Park Avenue Armory, New York, December 2016 – January 2017. Photograph James Ewing Photography. © Park Avenue Armory, 2016; Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto (Karl Marx)*, 2015/2017; Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto (Manuel Maples Arce)*, 2015/2017; Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto (André Breton)*, 2015/2017. All lower images, stills from 13-channel film installation, colour, 2-channel sound, shot on HD, aspect ratio 16:9, loop, 12 x 10min 30sec and 1 x 4min. Edition 6 + 4 patrons editions + 2 artist proofs. Courtesy Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney.



Ming Wong, *Devo Partire. Domani / I must go. Tomorrow*, 2011. Film stills. 5 channel video installation, 12 min. 58 sec. Courtesy of the artist and Carlier | Gebauer.

Such problematic declarations had and continue to have real consequences for the creation of visual arts, and the production of critical knowledge. The Chicago-based artist Catherine Sullivan has an interesting artistic path for our issue, as told to the choreographer Meg Stuart,

In the early 20th century, visual artists, dance and theater people worked together and shared ideas more frequently. Now it's hard to develop those kinds of collaborations. ... I came to making art as an actor. I studied theater, which is inherently cross-disciplinary. It's a big mess, though, because I work in the theater, and the notion of 'theatricality' in some spheres of the art world is fairly flat-footed ...

One has to wonder why, at this moment in time when the avant-garde itself has generated its own conventions, its own traditions, would we still be confronted with perspectives that position emotion, excess, and narrative against objectivity, reduction, and non-narrative?²

Here, the logic of the outlaw status of *acting* is rooted in the idea that is synonymous with *feigning*, *simulating*, *impersonating*, *faking*. Thus *to act* is obviously at the heart of the visual arts rejection for its 'inauthenticity'.

To assess and define acting as unreal could be regarded by some as nonsense, along with the dubious belief that visual arts would be 'corrupted or perverted by theater'.³ In a text written for *Voice Over*, Anselm Franke explained the marginal position of the actor vis-à-vis modernity,

It is of little wonder that against this backdrop Michel Foucault declared the actor to be the outlaw figure of modernity, and a paradigmatic counter figure to the entirety of western philosophy. The actor's *Uneigentlichkeit*—in-authenticity—makes them antithetical to the truth-claims that fueled modernity, and pushed them into the newly created zone of subalternity ...⁴



clockwise from top: Ming Wong, *Next Year / L'année prochaine*, 2015. Film still. Digital video, 15 min; Ming Wong, *Lerne Deutsch mit Petra von Kant / Learn German with Petra von Kant*, 2007. Film still. Single channel video installation (TV and carpet), 10 min, looped; Ming Wong, *Next Year / L'année prochaine*, 2015. Film still. Digital video, 15 min. Images courtesy of the artist and Carlier | Gebauer.

The theatre and the visual arts have changed along with their manifold definitions.

These thoughts and fruitless oppositions come to mind in light of the emerging body of visual artists who are intentionally escaping from them, or even contradicting them, in their works. One can observe the increase of visibility of artists who somehow released themselves from the above mentioned dichotomies and show as a core feature a deliberate and thoughtful use of acting.

I am not interested here in the actor as a social and mediated position, however my curiosity was sparked upon seeing a poster for an installation at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof. The poster was covered in twelve images of twelve characters, all played by Australian actress Cate Blanchett, the star of Julian Rosefeldt's latest work, *Manifesto* (2014-2015).⁵

The German artist Julian Rosefeldt has an interesting body of work to examine when thinking of the use of acting, as since the early 2000s he has

been appropriating codes and techniques from the cinema to delve into its history and mechanisms, while at the same time producing his own narratives and aesthetic.

In one of his early videos, *Global Soap* (2000), Rosefeldt collaged numerous clips together from soap operas throughout the world. On four screens, he associated similar attitudes, gestures and situations, thus building up a corpus of globalised behaviors. The original soundtrack was mostly erased in order to focus on the movement's dramatic language.

For a long time thereafter, words remained largely absent from his work, and gestures and situations sufficed to elaborate narratives in which a sense of the absurd dominated. Muteness may better serve these surreal atmospheres.

Yet, a full brouhaha welcomes the viewer into *Manifesto*. The actress's face is everywhere, though made up to look like others: recognisable contemporary characters like a broker, punk, scientist, teacher, puppeteer and choreographer. For the script, Rosefeldt fabricated thirteen collages

made up of fifteen manifestos from the fields of cinema, visual arts, dance, architecture, literature and politics; all spoken by Cate Blanchett. Beginning with 'The Communist Manifesto' by Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx (1848), which to some extent set parameters for the genre's matrix, Rosefeldt pays homage to the genre's history.

Thus, a school teacher professes cinema lessons to children, teaching them to steal from anywhere as nothing is original (in the words of Jim Jarmusch, Lars von Trier, etcetera), or a TV news anchor announces the conceptual art principles (according to Sol LeWitt, Elaine Sturtevant, etcetera),

'All current art is fake, not because it is copy, appropriation, simulacra or imitation but because it lacks the crucial push of power, guts and passion. All of man is fake. All of man is false.'

These texts, produced by and against their contexts, are thus associated with stereotypical scenes from western visual culture, inspired by mainstream cinema and television landscape.

Apart from their content and context within the piece, which we will not analyse here, the manifesto genre is rather interesting when thinking of acting. Strictly speaking, a manifesto is not a performative text, but it could be argued that it has the desire to be one. This ambition places it right in between writing and speaking, speaking and acting: they are 'texts-acts',⁶ lines that inspire change, on some magnitude. Hyperbole and a cavalier tone make the manifesto a consistent theatrical text to perform, and a formidable repertoire of hijackable authoritarian voices. They have an air of the dramatic monologue.

Rosefeldt's first twist in direction was casting a female to perform these primarily masculine voices. In interviews and texts surrounding the piece, this



Catherine Sullivan, *Triangle of Need*, 2007. Stills, 16mm film (black and white/color, sound), running time 6 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.



Catherine Sullivan, *Triangle of Need*, 2007. Still, 16mm film (black and white/color, sound), running time 6 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

MODES OF ACTING ARE THE RESULT OF VERY SPECIFIC CULTURAL, GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS, AND AT THE SAME TIME ARE AN ACTIVE ELEMENT IN SHAPING THESE SYSTEMS.

choice appears as an almost feminist bravery, however the piece does not go much deeper than its parodic temper, and lacks content as well in a broader perspective.

The filmed situation-to-text association is sometimes obvious, as when Cate-the-choreographer vociferates excerpts from Yvonne Rainer's manifesto while nervously puffing, with affected gestures, on her cigarette, but often a gap appears between the two. Then, the speech becomes odd and dissociates itself from these tamed contexts. Content-wise, it is difficult to find deeper meanings other than the clear comical effect these dissonances create. At the least, this disjunction, along with the installation display (twelve short simultaneous projections played in loop in the same open space), and our awareness of being in an art exhibition, are purposeful devices for a distancing effect, preventing the spectators from identifying with the characters. Unlike with her cinematic roles, these personae performed by Cate Blanchett remain surfaces and reveal themselves as fictitious identities, notably because they do not have time and the script that would allow them to properly realise themselves. The whole installation ceaselessly reminds us we are watching an actress playing a role, thus, disrupting the cinematic illusion.

To a certain extent, Cate Blanchett's acting is ironic, it is made up of near imitations, of quotations of a coded visual culture that is constructed by films, and even the kinds of films in which she usually appears. Indeed, modes of acting are the result of very specific cultural, geographical and historical contexts, and at the same time are an active element in shaping these systems. By way of an obvious illustration, we could argue that Marilyn Monroe's

modes of acting are at once, directly produced by the society in which she worked, and at the same time, she somehow shaped, outside of the screen, female representations and behaviors of her era, and even afterwards.

When Julian Rosefeldt casts a known actress to perform stereotyped movie roles within a non-cinematic environment and uses scripts which clashed with their filmed *mise-en-scènes*, he unveils several acting procedures by breaking their simulation capacity. While revealing these mechanisms, *Manifesto* is very seductive, but not toxic enough. Rosefeldt's neat arrangements and the actress's virtuosity struggle to create space for irritations where a critical momentum could have appeared. The 'meta-acting' and the duplication of the actress might appear as its most interesting feature, to the extent that it struggles to interest us with its own narratives, turning them pretty much into alibis. To some degree, be it Rosefeldt's intention or not, the work is a compelling candidate to stimulate thoughts on the use of acting in visual arts.

Several contemporary artists occupy similar territories where acting practices appear displaced by using different strategies, such as miscasting, repetition, purposefully bad-acting, over-acting, parody, or exaggeration. These expressions go against the idea of acting as trivial, and contrary to that idea, they settle acting as a culturally specific practice worth reflecting upon and appropriating.

Ming Wong is a relevant example with his aslant use of acting in his remakes of classic movies. He practices miscasting strategies: he often plays all the roles himself using thick artifices. Male, Singaporean, Ming Wong plays, against all odds, Fassbinder's Petra von Kant, Pasolini's bourgeoisie,



Ragnar Kjartansson, *Krieg*, 2016. Opera in one act by Ragnar Kjartansson. Composition by Kjartan Sveinsson in a recording by the German Film Orchestra Babelsberg at Volksbühne Theater, Berlin, Germany. Photograph Thomas Aurin. Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik.

A SOMEWHAT TRADITIONAL AND ESTABLISHED POSITION CONSIDERS ... THAT THE 'FAKE' IS INHERENT IN THEATRE, WHERE EMOTIONS 'ARE NOT REAL', WHILE VISUAL ARTS, AND NOTABLY ITS PERFORMANCE DISCIPLINES, ARE 'TRUE REALITY'.

and even Delphine Seyrig in *Marienbad*. These campy disjunctions force an estrangement effect in which, with audacious exaggerations, constructed behaviours appear along with the possibility of using others. In *Art-it*, Ming Wong tells Andrew Maerkle about his strategy of 'irritative acting':

Sometimes viewers will look at me and think not just, 'He's not a man or a woman', but also, 'He's Chinese ! He's not an Italian mother !' That also throws people off. Or the fact that I'm saying the lines wrong, because I'm not an Italian speaker and I'm mangling these really famous lines and there are all these irritations.⁷

Analysing the acting practice in Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin's videos leads us to similar reflections. However, in their work we do not find the realisation of one identifiable stereotype in a character, but an accumulation of them, an overflow and excess of singularities within one single acting body. Thus, the character becomes a confused assemblage, yet strangely familiar as we intermittently spot recognisable attitudes. '... a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms'⁸ which, in their work, seems to be the aftermath of our contemporary societies being saturated with self-recordings. Indeed, their characters are constantly over-represented, repeating actions motivated by their awareness of being filmed (often by themselves).

We also encounter scrambling subjects, visibly being 'too many' per body in the video work of Catherine Sullivan. As she explained in a discussion mentioned earlier with Meg Stuart, she found with the visual arts a way to reflect 'about acting as a form that could have a more strategic use' than in the theatre or in the cinema. With video works, such as *Triangle of Need* (2007), surplus acting-behaviors are placed next to each other until the body malfunctions. Grappling with too many modes of acting, these unintelligible subjects undo the acting itself. Sullivan eventually found in the visual arts a space to use the acting as a particular mode of representation.

The Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson, who enjoys an increasing visibility, is a self-evident figure when thinking of the use of acting as an art form. Several of his major works can be seen as many displacements of modes of acting and attributes of theatre into visual arts formats (for example, sculpture or performance). In an interesting discussion with Markús Thór Andrésson he makes explicit these creative displacements,

Acting is such an interesting side of human expression: we pretend, and it affects others. I find it a very honest art form... Theater is a wonderful form in and of itself, but I approach it as a visual artist... I think as an artist I can bring certain elements into theater and borrow theatrical elements for my work...⁹

Following these artists' statements, one can wonder about the lack of discussion between the theatre and the visual arts, unlike with other forms such as dance or architecture. When we think about theoretical notions of presence, embodiment, role-play, mise-en-scène and performative strategies within both disciplines, it is, without doubt, necessary to enlarge our critical references (evidently delve into the theatre studies' enormous corpus) to follow these artistic trajectories and think and write about acting as a significant practice used for various meanings, positions and narratives in visual arts.

Removed from this complex legacy which settled theatre and its derivatives as an 'artificial' activity existing outside of an obscure definition of what is our 'true reality', we could as well take a new look at artistic gestures from the past, often caught up in critical discourses shaped by similar flimsy beliefs. ●

Notes

1. "The knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real." Robert Ayers in conversation with Marina Abramović, *A Sky Filled With Shooting Stars*, Art Fair, Conversations, Armory Arts Week, 2010. See <http://www.askyfilledwithshootingstars.com/wordpress/?p=1197>
2. 'Catherine Sullivan and Meg Stuart', *Bomb, Artists in Conversation*, No.104, Summer 2008.

3. These terms 'corrupted' and 'perverted' were used by Michael Fried in his essay 'Art and Objecthood', 1967.

4. Anselm Franke, 'Afterword', *Voice Over – On Staging, Theatricality and Performative Strategies in Contemporary Art Practices*, Cecilia Widenheim (ed.), Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2009.

5. *Manifesto* premiered at ACMI Melbourne in 2015. It was exhibited from 10 February to 6 November 2016 at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; from 28 May 2016 – 19 February 2017 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; at Park Avenue Armory, New York, 7 December 2016 – 8 January 2017; at the Sprengel Museum Hannover and Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, from 16 December 2016 – 14 May 2017; and from 3 - 25 June during the Holland Festival in Amsterdam.

6. Eva Yampolsky, "Manifeste mode d'emploi: l'action collective à l'époque des réseaux socionumériques", *Lignes*, No.40, 2013, pp.151-167.

7. Andrew Maerkle, 'Ming Wong: a relationship of like and unlike terms', Part III, *Art-it*, 2010. See http://www.art-it.asia/u/admin_ed_feature_e/ZodyGHwXtamI5VvUnBNu

8. Susan Sontag, 'Notes on camp', *Partisan Review*, Fall, 1964.

9. Markús Thór Andrésson, 'Ragnar Kjartansson: a simple act of forgiveness', *Flash Art*, No.281, November/December 2011, p. 78-81.

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Ragnar Kjartansson, *Krieg*, 2016. Opera in one act by Ragnar Kjartansson. Composition by Kjartan Sveinsson in a recording by the German Film Orchestra Babelsberg at Volksbühne Theater, Berlin, Germany. Photograph Thomas Aurin. Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik.