

Virtuosi of Exposure

On Sarah Vanhee's *Turning Turning (a choreography of thoughts)*

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The performers come to the centre of the stage one by one and they speak, as quickly as they can, whatever comes to mind, until a timer sounds, and then they stop. This is their practice; it is what they present to us, what they have to show and share with us. It may be they are there to teach us something, to show us how to pay attention to things: as universal citizens if you will, how to acknowledge everything that makes up a world, that is in the world, along with everything else that *might* be in it; as performers, how to respond to the demands of one's own particular practice; and as spectators, as fellow travelers of this practice, how to take it all in, that which is going on right now and also what passes, too uncatchable. We can be virtuosi, all of us, of thinking and showing and doing, if we can learn to fix our attention – or should that be to un-fix our habits of attending? – with regard to what is worth taking seriously and what is to be dismissed: not just what touches our senses, not just the remarkable stuff that impresses itself upon us, but the unremarkable stuff that does not.

Which makes them, these people that are speaking – or so they appear now, fourteen or fifteen months since I was there at the performance – such exposed figures, virtuosi of exposure also. I don't mean in the sense of something of themselves being exposed to us and each other (however 'personal' automatic speech may sound in the moment) but their exposure to what surrounds them, everything that is there, as if the furthest things in the universe – the furthest and least likely to be called upon – were no less in reach than the most immediate. As if there were nothing necessary to the distance between things, other than this exposure to what follows, to whatever arrives. Maybe they are fighting back, maybe that is what these people are doing, attempting to repopulate an environment that is overfull already with a few bizarre objects of their own, pressed out from their faces, their mouths, their way of looking towards us as they speak, their way of insisting themselves into the small space in front of them, between them and us, with a sort of impassioned neutrality. These objects that they put there – images, bits of speech, forms of life – are in part conjured into being, and in part pointed at, indexed as possibilities for gazing upon or engaging with or speaking of another time, glanced now merely, one sort of surface sliding

against another, as if seen from a window onto a world that moves outside that window, as if picked up from overheard chatter in a public place where every voice has its own channel.

I say a few objects. In a way what they are doing is inexhaustible, like a travelogue of the endlessly noticeable, although this is not a record of places and spaces someone has passed through, nor even of what passes through a person (as if our thinking were some sort of animating energy 'within' us), so much as a registering of our own capacity to move, to speak, to concentrate on something. Anyway the performers – the ones that do the moving – are not inexhaustible. We know this because they are like us, and we know about our own limitations. Even if the combinations, the associations between all the things that are or might be, are as good as inexhaustible, the infinitely rechargeable novelty of it all, the ever receding interestingness of anything that can be said, outruns the ability of anyone here to go with it, to put it to use, to give it any more than a moment's thought, if that. And so they stand each one, at the centre of the stage, exposed to a universe that has no centre, in the classical – or if you will neo-classical – pose of the solo performance artist, their living-clothes serving as their work clothes, looking towards us when they can, speaking as they can according to the requirements of the task, their hands – or so I remember their hands – guiding the air about them as if guiding the sentences into shape; as if the air, unlike the words that will inhabit it, were finite; as if the concern after all were not with the movement of thought, which is indeed interminable, but the eventuality for any of us of running out of breath. As if, that is to say, the twist and curl of utterance that blooms upon such exposure were, in all its low-temperature baroque expressivity, an intimation of the coming breathlessness, a practice of feeding upon air.

Some sort of a go, then, as I say, a year or so after seeing a three-person performance of Sarah Vanhee's *Turning Turning*, at saying something about what might be going on, about what Vanhee and her performers are doing, the practice they are involved with, and about what – for me, as someone who was there watching, if not also for them and for others – that practice makes happen. I use the word 'practice' deliberately, if advisedly. Vanhee herself writes about the performance being based upon 'a practice I developed over years, which I call "thinking-talking"',¹ with the implication that this activity is less a technique in the service of a theatrical outcome than a form of human behaviour with a significance independent of the theatrical occasion, the latter serving rather as an occasion for the practice to be presented, exposed, to others who are unfamiliar with it, and – as we shall see – in the company of other

practices. Importantly for Vanhee, the practice is not simply something to do, an ability that can be acquired and then rehearsed like a pastime or a hobby, but involves a critical element, a 'rather than' element, aimed at transformation and the production of difference, of multiplicity. At the least, an estranging or intensification of the experience of time in which this or any other pastime is pursued. As such, there is an aesthetic politics involved. As Vanhee puts it, 'Rather than just a vehicle for communication, I consider speech to be movement, with specific patterns and characteristics to each individual's speech. In order to not only emphasize these patterns but also transform and overcome them, we developed different tools.'

What, then, is a practice? Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has written a large book on the topic (*You Must Change Your Life! On Anthropotechnology*), but offers up concisely in a more recently published lecture series (*The Art of Philosophy*), focused upon practices of thought and scholarly theory, a general account of practice as a 'mixed domain' of human action made up of contemplative and active elements, more specifically a form of training, of 'self-reflexive training', that is not so much to do with the production of objects or the influencing of circumstances as it is with developing 'the practicing person's state of capability. Depending on the context, this is defined as constitution, virtue, virtuosity, competence, excellence, or fitness.'² As that stands, this is a concept we are all presumably familiar with, although Sloterdijk's concern is also with how practices become unfamiliar, or mis-recognise each other, or are transformed or become difficult to sustain as times and circumstances impose themselves.

However, it was not Sloterdijk I was reading – or still learning to read – when I saw the performance of Vanhee and her colleagues in late 2011, but the recently translated first volume of philosopher and science historian Isabelle Stengers' *Cosmopolitics*. And it is Stengers who comes back to me again now. A way in to saying a little about Stengers' conception of practice, with regard to the above excursus on Vanhee's work, may be to remark that the performers – or practitioners – on this stage or any other are not the only ones sharing the air. The cosmopolitics that Stengers proposes, in which there is no sort of universalism to be taken for granted and where any claims on the part of science – or politics – to speak for 'nature' once and for all must remain in question, involves what she calls an 'ecology of practices.'³ For Stengers, to ask what a practice is, is to ask what sorts of constraints and responsibilities it has to negotiate in order to sustain itself; it is to consider also what kinds of value it produces (right here, right now, and for whom); and it is to register how any particular practice 'presents itself' to others in a world

where all sorts of different practices (theoretical physics, laboratory-based chemistry, verbal choreography, the maintenance and use of underground transport systems, witchcraft, you name it) exist, or are performed, in an 'ecological' interdependence with each other. Constraints, according to Stengers, are a matter of requirements and obligations: requirements having to do with experimental procedure, the satisfying of measurements and the behavior of phenomena, whereas obligations have to do, say, with the history in which a practice is produced, or with our own behavior when we enter situations of controversy, or when we present our work to colleagues who may recognize or dispute its value.

What follows from this is that there is no practice that does not involve at some level an element of rhetorical persuasion; and there is no rhetorical persuasion without an element of unpredictability, some possible disagreement, some instability or interference or misunderstanding to disturb how any practice moves in the world, or is taken to move. In these lights Stengers reminds us of the Greek word 'pharmakon', something that can be a cure but in the wrong dose or the wrong circumstance can also be a poison. She points us towards various pharmacological practices, or as we might say now various professions of affective labour, pre- and post-industrial – charlatan, populist, astrologer, ideologue, magician, hypnotist, charismatic teacher – while insisting on the rhetorical-pharmacological element even in those practices or professions we might consider the most materially, technically, 'scientifically' grounded: particle physicists too have to have to persuade that their neutrinos and Higgs bosons have satisfied the requirements of experimental proof, so that the particle – newly identified, newly fabricated we might say – can be acknowledged in its autonomous existence, an existence dating back, for a 'factish'⁴ such as these, not only to the event of its discovery but to the origin of the universe, as if its existence had a time-frame independent of human knowledge, existing both 'in itself' and 'for us'.

The ecology of practices, then – or so I take the argument – is a function of the multiplicity of constraints and causalities and unintended meanings and effects that go to make up the situations in which particular forms of value or usefulness are produced. These are situations of co-dependence – or events, as Stengers puts it, of 'reciprocal capture' – such as the relation between a parasite and its host, a predator and its prey, or the underground transport system and the heterogeneity of its users, where what matters here and now is a certain 'holding together with others', although not in consensus so much as symbiosis. Here, what counts, for some if not for all, is in the event that something 'works', as need and desire and circumstance determine. I think, for instance, of a

performer – some performer or other, any performer it may be – on the high-wire of their virtuosity, the wire working for them as well as it must, while it is the rest of us that hold our breath. A device for the reciprocal capture of attention, the co-production of excitement, and an intensification of temporal experience: those who are captured care what happens next, to the extent they anticipate something may be about to go very right, or else very wrong.

To speak, then, technically as it were, about Sarah Vanhee's practice as I encountered it in the Frascati theatre in Amsterdam during October 2011. I record here some notes I made shortly after the performance. This is a live event, which is to say it takes place at the same time – right here and now – for all those participants who belong to the theatrical situation: the makers, the performers, the spectators etc. The show – *Turning Turning (a choreography of thoughts)* – involves little more than the direct presentation of a practice, a mode of doing and producing that takes place according to particular constraints. Those constraints are the following: there are three performers who will speak as quickly or as immediately as they can, whatever speech comes to mind for each of them (dealing with the full demands of speech, i.e. syntax and deliberate, continuous sense, not just random words or vocables). They do this in turn, one at a time, for a pre-determined period, measured by a small stop-clock that is visible and audible to the spectators, but small enough so that we cannot see how much time is being measured. We might say the performers are speaking before thinking, or speaking as they speak, although that begs a question perhaps of what we might mean by thinking. There is anyway virtuosity at work, which is to say special capabilities are on display.

Virtuosity can be taken here in two – related – senses. One sense refers to the *specialist* capabilities of the artists, Vanhee and her collaborators, who have conceived and developed the work, rehearsed it, devised its form, structured its presentation, and who have the skills – the *nous* – to deliver it competently in a professionally run theatre to a paying public. The second sense of virtuosity – which has been taken up in recent decades by political theorists such as Paolo Virno⁵, concerned with the exploitability of human intellectual, affective and social capabilities under the conditions of contemporary 'post-Fordist' capitalism – has to do with the 'special' capabilities that all of us in that theatre share, as creatures able to think and move and speak. In Vanhee's work these two senses of virtuosity, the special and the specialist, the held in common and the held apart, the most ordinary and the hard-to-do, are combined in an intensity of attention, captured, persuaded, transferred:

the concentration of the performers on their task, and the attention drawn from the spectators as the task is performed, as we attempt to listen at speed, to follow and anticipate the various tracks of thoughts, as we marvel at the difficulty, as we enjoy the differences and judge the relative accomplishment of the three performers (our judgment doubtless clouded by blatant favoritism), and as we wonder if at any point any of them might collapse.

As for the 'value' that this practice generates: at the back of the stage, above the performers, there is a row of video screens, and at various times an 'expert' from another practice – a linguist, a neurologist, a psychoanalyst, a performance theorist – will appear on one of the screens, recorded speaking in analogous conditions on a previous occasion, responding to a video of the thinking-talking practice. In turn, each of these experts will say something about what – for them – Vanhee and her collaborators are doing or have done, about what sorts of discoveries their experiments bear witness to, what sort of thing – if any – their work makes apprehensible: giving it a respectable name, giving it a value, so that something noticed, something shown, invented, conjured into being, may be acknowledged as having been 'there' – *in potentia*, as it were – before this began. The observations of one depend upon the activity of the others, constrained into a practice, acknowledged as such. It goes without saying that the pre-recorded experts, up there on their airless screens, also move their hands.

There is a last thing I want to say for now, something to do with what is captured – or reached for – in Vanhee's subtitle that gestures towards a slip between one medium and another, the movement of bodies and the movement of thoughts and their choreographic symbiosis. What I want to say relates to a fragment of theoretical writing that stuck in my mind some years ago, and which I have tried to make use of before – as if that is what such fragments are for, to put to use, to make productive somehow in the movement or stasis of one's own thought – and which niggles again now, to be spoken anyhow, to be cited, quoted, written out again in words. The fragment is a passage in Fredric Jameson's book on theatre and theoretical praxis *Brecht and Method*, where he muses on 'those instances in which the theoretical content of our everyday movements suddenly intrudes upon us and our fellow "actors"'. For Jameson – for Brecht – our gestures, our actions – for example those things we do with our hands while we are trying to speak sense about something that we are being shown, these gestures and actions carry an 'inherent and verbal knowledge', which we are always trying to act out, for ourselves and for others. We are always telling stories to explain

ourselves, writes Jameson, 'dramatizing our points in all kinds of ways'. So it is, for Brecht as for Jameson, that 'everybody always acts'; and so it is for Jameson that it may be 'better to shift the vocabulary of reflexivity, and to suggest that all acts are not so much reflexive and self-conscious as they are already proto-dramatic.'⁶ It takes, though, or so I understand the argument again, something like a practice – Jameson might say a *praxis* of performance – a way of showing and telling according to certain constraints, to bring the proto-dramatic potentiality of our merest acts and gestures into view, for whoever cares to look and listen. Not to give space to our unconscious reflexes merely but to articulate, in Jameson's phrase, 'what people think about what they do' – to give living form, to give movement indeed, to a choreography of thoughts. It takes, I think, a movement of disturbance to achieve this, a forcing even, or it may be a falling, between one mode and another, something to be shown imploding upon something being said, an image-making capacity locked down or spiraling out in words, so that bodies have to wriggle and gazes press forward, as if sensing could expel itself, put itself outside of itself, exposedly so, and impress itself on another's understanding.

¹ <http://www.sarahvanhee.com/turning>

² Peter Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as Practice*, trans. Karen Margolis, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 6.

³ Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, trans. Robert Bononno, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. See in particular Book 1. *The Science Wars*, pp. 1-86.

⁴ The term is borrowed from Bruno Latour, but see Stengers p. 19.

⁵ See Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson, New York: Semiotext(e), 2004.

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, London: Verso, 2000, pp. 84, 83.