

## Lecture for Every One

At the time of writing I have not experienced – neither seen nor heard – Sarah Vanhee’s *Lecture for Every One*. I haven’t even read the text of the lecture. To this extent I am in the same situation as those who might invite Vanhee – or accede to her offer to invite herself – to their annual general meeting, their monthly sales conference, their weekly support group, or their once-in-a-lifetime investiture or wedding party or leaving do. As such, her performance comes onto the horizon as a sort of promise: but a promise of what? I imagine how it might be if Vanhee were to bring the lecture into the kind of environment I am familiar with, a university committee meeting, say, where – whatever else we might be to ourselves and to each other during the rest of our lives: thinkers, teachers, writers, activists, friends, or opponents – on these occasions we focus our otherwise chaotic and multiform selves into forms of distributed and coded rationality, with more-or-less identifiable interests and modes of bureaucratic capability. Who, or what, would Vanhee be in those circumstances? A stranger in the room? A representative of some other part of the institutional apparatus, proposing *her* strangeness as an item on *our* agenda? What would she say? How might she act? And how should we respond? Would we do what such gatherings are supposed to do: debate the issue – whatever the issue turns out to be – then make a note in the minutes and commit ourselves to a point of action? What sort of action – what sort of decision – might Vanhee’s intervention call-on us to take, if any?

What I do know is that Vanhee has already been working in this territory of the carefully measured – but at the same time radically uncertain – promise of the human encounter. Her 2010 book *The Miraculous Life of Claire C* recounts a series of meetings with strangers, conducted through emails and on park benches in Amsterdam, with the intention of re-populating an unfinished novel with the ‘real life’ that the novel evokes. The book is self-consciously clever. It is also touching in what it says about the quality of accidental intimacy being part of the texture of life in all of our cities. Like much of Vanhee’s work – for example, the ongoing project *Untitled*, which involves individual members of the public visiting another individual’s home for a personal tour of the self-accumulated art that is kept there – the book speaks of the hopeful, but also uncertain ways that the fictions we carry around with us, and carry ourselves around in, are able to slip in and out of reality at any moment. As if, indeed, the promises we make to our imaginations might at any moment be called to account by the world those very promises are drawn from, with who-knows-what consequences.

My own first encounter with Vanhee’s work was in the theatre, at a performance of *Turning Turning (a choreography of thoughts)* in 2011, where Vanhee and two fellow-performers presented a particular, virtuosic practice; a way of speech, to put it simply, which involved the performers speaking whatever came into their mind as quickly as they could, in turn, for a fixed period of time. It is a performance in which words and images – a countless number of both – swirl and refract randomly like oil splashed onto the pool of thought. It is a work that has the strange effect of seeming to promise us everything and anything, while leaving us with something else that is also more than that ‘everything’: the singularity, the fragility of the individual person, the bare actor, as it were, attempting to think, attempting to speak. If, however, *Turning Turning* was about a very particular provocation of attention, putting the activity of thinking itself into play and having it acted-out in public for spectatorial

consumption, *Lecture for Every One* promises a different sort of relationship to thinking. Indeed, I imagine the *Lecture* more as a coaxing to action – or at least a call to activity – which it does by functioning as a sort of placeholder: for other people’s thoughts, for other people’s considerations, or just for other people’s fifteen or twenty minutes of stopping-time, of rest from the machine, and of ethical recuperation. Something ‘for’ everyone, however we might take it. But then, what is at stake in that ‘for’?

When discussing some of the ideas behind *Lecture for Every One*, Vanhee talks about the ancient Greek concept of *parrhesia*, or ‘free speech’, in the sense of words spoken in public in a way that puts the speaker at risk, speech that takes on the fear of truth-telling – in relation to power, in relation to strangers – speech, we might say, that puts the truth itself at risk. It goes without saying, there is nothing simple – and nothing too direct either – about free speech conceived in this way. As Foucault remarked in his late lectures on *parrhesia*, what is at stake is not “the disclosure of a secret that has to be excavated from the depths of the soul”, but rather “the *relation* of the self to the truth or to some rational principle”. That indirection is only likely to be exacerbated when Vanhee translates her lecture, conceived largely for non-arts spaces, to the rather specific public space of the theatre, as she will be doing at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts this spring. Perhaps, though, the peculiar promise of *Lecture for Every One* has also to do with driving a line between a gesture conceived, on the one hand, very simply and directly indeed – “it should be possible”, she tells me, “it’s basically just a person who says some things, a person who speaks to other persons” – and, on the other hand, as something altogether *difficult*. As Vanhee herself points out, the very title of her lecture – leaving aside the self-evident element of hubristic ambition – is an equivocation: can a lecture for ‘everyone’ be at the same time a lecture for every ‘one’? What kind of relationships, between individuals and the collective, between citizens and strangers, between natives and foreigners, between oneself and one’s several other selves and all one’s significant and insignificant others, would be at stake in that distinction?

Another writer who addressed, as she put it, “the difficulty of the difficulty” around the question of “how to represent the aporia between everyone and every ‘one’”, was the philosopher Gillian Rose. Rose’s concerns – not unlike those of Vanhee, who spoke to me about Rousseau’s social contract, or the challenge of engaging the ‘rational egoist’ identified by Hobbes, in the interests of the common good – are with the politics of citizenship, or as Rose refers to it, the questions of love and the state. What distinguishes Rose’s thoughts is the way her critique of what she calls spurious universals – ethical, religious, and legal values that tend to be imposed and maintained through violence and exclusion – leads not to an outright rejection of such values, but rather to the ever-to-be-repeated, ever-to-be-renewed performance of an ‘aporetic universalism’, an indefatigable trying again – at love, at justice, at truth, at care – that takes place in the ‘broken middle’ of all of our equivocations. Rose’s own examples refer to the likes of Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt; for Vanhee, too, Arendt’s thoughts on the potentiality but also the fragility of the ‘space of appearance’ that comes into being wherever people “are together in the manner of speech and action”, has been crucial to her work on the *Lecture*. It is the sort of thinking that seems to borrow something from a theatrical way of understanding the world. And the sort of considerations – practical considerations, we might say – that Rose discusses in relation to the performances that take place in the broken middle – philosophical, artistic, and political performances – have to do with dilemmas such as those of authors and actors: what it means, for instance, to

speaking with one's own voice, or to act or perform in one's own name, when one is heard by others as a stranger, or when one's own name is at the same time a sort of pseudonym. The work of love and the violence of the situation tend to go hand in hand.

Vanhee takes up the thread of love and violence when we meet to talk. "For me", she says, "this problem of the stranger is very important; the stranger, not as something that should be repelled or embraced, but as something that fundamentally changes us, something viral that cannot but transform you. It has something almost brutal, and I like this brutality." When discussing her own role in the *Lecture*, as an actor, a persona; as another sort of aporetic performance, a way of registering – alongside the simple 'possibility' referred to earlier of a person speaking to other people – she also speaks about the accompanying degrees of 'impossibility' inherent in the project. She is there, she suggests, in the places she is invited into, as "the clown, the stupid one, maybe a 'nobody' or an 'everybody', as one element of this 'being amongst'. It's a tricky role, because I cannot speak about 'we' at that moment; there is no 'we' I can speak of. And at the same time I cannot speak about 'you' either, because there is no 'you' that I know. Consequently, I can only speak of myself. But I cannot speak of myself as an example." If not an example, I suggest to her, then perhaps in her role – as an intruder, a guest, a messenger, a parasite, an analyst, or a visiting functionary from some other worldly reality that by its very existence draws attention to the contingent structures and boundaries of the situation into which she arrives – she also brings a potentiality to the situation that was always already there. A sort of elasticity: not quite in the sense of a situation expanding of its own accord, priding itself on its capacity to accommodate – and it may be tame and incorporate – the foreign element, the stranger, but rather the lecturer herself, as *part* of the situation, for as long as she is there, bringing that elasticity herself, and then... taking it away. An elasticity of the imagination, let's call it, which takes perhaps its most telling risk – to recall the earlier topic of *parrhesia* – when it takes on the banality, the everydayness, the ubiquity of fear. "A great deal of our imagination", Vanhee says to me, "is being filled with fear. Fear asks so much of the imagination. How, then, to address the imagination in another way than by filling it with fear? I think about the society we live in as a fiction we decide to believe in. One of the questions I put to myself in this project is what kind of *other* fiction would I find interesting to believe in? What other images come with that? What other languages come with that?"

So much promise, so much that *could* be promised, and imagined. But promising can also be a sort of trap. As Vanhee herself allows: "It is not *the* lecture for everyone; it is just a lecture, for every one." It makes a difference. "I think, anyway, that it will not be enough", she says, "because when I say 'lecture for every one' to you, you have a dream about it. I do too. But this can never be that. It's not a dream speech, it's actually quite unspectacular." I say to her that I was imagining it might be unspectacular. Something, in the absence of the event, is taking shape. We return to the question of the performance as a placeholder: for the imagination of the stranger element, for something yet unspoken, unthought-of, undone; for something yet to come into appearance, if only some fleeting contribution to the struggles of the broken middle and the work of love. "It probably has a lot to do with love", Vanhee says, "where love is keeping that space open for whatever comes in, even if you never know what it will be. The perverse thing is, of course, that people don't 'give' me that space; basically, I take it. I put them in the situation of having given me that space, so there is something very forceful about it. I don't know if it will stay this way but in the text, as it is now, I also say

‘thank you for giving me the time to speak in the coming fifteen minutes’. But they didn’t decide to give me that. There’s something violent in it.”

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