

LETTERS TO **AN ABSENT AUDIENCE**

From Michalis Angelidis, Xenia Koghilaki
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This collection of letters was written by Michalis Angelidis, Xenia Koghilaki and michela filzi, the graduating students of the MA Solo/Dance/Authorship (SODA) program in 2021. SODA is a practice-led Masters degree that explores body- and movement-based performative practices within the field of contemporary arts. The program is part of the Inter-University Centre for Dance Berlin (HZT) and the Berlin University of the Arts (UdK).

Part of the graduation from the SODA program is a public performance by each student. However, due to the pandemic, the final presentation this year will be streamed live or presented as video documentation.

As the first, and hopefully the last, SODA generation to graduate without a public event, we decided to write three letters to our audience: one from each of us. The letters come from different artistic practices but share a common need. The need to address people who would have been our audience in other circumstances. To tell them how we feel, as makers of live performative events, without them being present.

Dear audience,

I'm nobody. That is who I am when you are not there. I am a nobody who can become someone or something only when you are there. My becoming depends on your presence, on your gaze, on your attention. Without it, my becoming is incomplete, vain and purposeless. Without you, I will never become. I will be nobody. That is what a performer is without an audience. An incomplete presence.

Theater is the treaty where the presence of the performer and the presence of the spectator meet, interact and co-depend on each other.

The essence of this meeting is the transformation of both through the act of performing. This transformation that takes place during a performative event is a continuous flow of energy between the spectator and the performer. It co-dependents on the presence of both. Both the spectator and the performer are the essential components of this flow. Without them it doesn't exist. A performance can be rehearsed; however, it can never be complete without the energetic charge of the spectator's attention. Furthermore, the performer without this attention, has no impetus to reach a transmitting level of energy.

Theater is a ceremonial condition. It is a condition for collective gatherings in order to exchange, to change, to contemplate, to imagine through other bodies. It is a condition of interruption, an interruption of the everyday, of our specified temporalities. It is also the condition where the performing body exceeds itself, to reach with its energy other bodies. To transform them, by offering a different version of them. It is the condition where the performer, the nobody, becomes something, someone, through the eyes of someone else. And the spectator is co- transformed by this becoming.

This letter is written after a year of general lockdown and social distancing due to the covid-19 pandemic, after a year that the ceremonial dimension of theater is absent. I wonder, which bodies can now justify our existence by offering a version of it? Which condition is left for collective gathering, concentrating, contemplating?

Considering all the above in the era of its absence, it becomes even more evident that theater is much more than a mere cultural activity. It is foremost a place for co-dreaming, co-existing, co-sharing and co-transfiguration.

Any attempt to share or reproduce the performative event outside its treaty, limits its transformative power to a mere documentation of it. It lacks its atmosphere, its energy, the very condition that generates it. All those elements I am busy with in my work as a maker.

Dear audience, I miss theater. I miss our gathering. I miss our sharing. I miss you.

„The wind’s dreadful song“

Online streaming / 6 July 2021, 8pm / HZT website

Dear,

While I am preparing myself to see you, I can't help thinking about how much I have been missing dancing with/for/about/next to you. I can't stop thinking of your hair swirling in the dim light, while I try to catch a glimpse of your face.

To be honest, I was waiting for the chance to seduce you tonight and it breaks my heart that the conditions won't allow you to appear.

I can now only imagine hearing the sound of your steps coming in the room. It is like a favorite song. It always creates anticipation and brings excitement. A moment I could stay in for ever.

Yes, I know It has been a hard time for both of us. But still I want you to know that wherever this road takes us, and no matter how long it may take, we will finally meet again doubtful but fearless.

Tonight you will be in my dance and my dance is where you always are,

Until then and with all my heart,

Xenia

“Bang bang bodies”

Online Streaming / 26 June 2021, 8pm / HZT website

Dear shoes-wearer,

do you remember how often we used to cross paths at performances in Berlin before the Pandemic?

I just remembered those sneakers you were often wearing, that make a squeaky sound as you walked across the linoleum floor after the show.

What have they been rubbing and squeaking on while the theatres were closed?

Or those thin flip-flops that you would slip in and out of when we were hanging out at the bar. Are you wearing them now to air your feet after this interminable winter?

It is funny that i remember your shoes so vividly now that we mostly see each other online. Maybe because my mind starts to wonder when the wholeness of your body is reduced to head and shoulders by the framing of the camera.

But before i start to wander away, let me tell you the reason why i am writing to you.

I have to break the sad news to you that we will not be able to meet in person at SODA WORKS this July. My collaborators and i are preparing an experience for you, that you will be able to attend only partly.

It seems that our enjoyment of performing and attending live art together is still delegated to technical devices, and i invite you to join the live-streaming of our performative installation: “In someone else's shoes, metabolic encounters”.

Wait, before you dismiss the idea of sitting in front of your screen on a hot summer evening, let me tell you how i plan to invite you.

First some background information: during our research we got fascinated by the concept of *interpassivity* and how we could play with it to bridge the distance between performers and attendants.

Interpassivity is the cultural behaviour of delegating the enjoyment of an experience to other people or other things. For example, “we can speak of *interpassivity* when people insist that others drink their beer for them, or when they let recording devices watch TV programs in their place.”¹

As i was mentioning before, we got used to delegating cameras to be present instead of our bodies, while our screen becomes the interface to our enjoyment of remote events, places and relationships. But are there other forms of delegation beside the technology of communication platforms?

Could you feel as if you are participating in a performance, when something of yours is standing-in your absence?

Over the past month we started collecting our friends' footwear as their stand-ins, as proxies of their participation in our project.

¹ Robert Pfaller, “The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment”, Edinburgh University Press 2017 (8)

We decided on footwear because we see it as the interface between our bodies and our direct surroundings. We wear it to protect our feet and follow our daily trails. As we walk, run, and dance it alters our balance, posture, and impact force to the ground. Shoes make our bodies as much as we make them. They carry the stories of the many actants in the complex system of modern capitalism as they are “offbeat proxy for globalization too”².

I would say they are a symbol of our quotidian relationship to our bodies and our environment.

So let me ask you, would you send a pair of your footgear as your representative to our performance?

Would you let your things enjoy the somatic experience while you attend on them via streaming?

I look forward to receiving a pair of your beloved shoes.

Yours sincerely,

michela

„In someone else's shoes, metabolic encounters“

Online streaming / 9 July 2021, 5-9 pm / HZT website

² Caroline Knowles, “The Flip-Flop Trail and Fragile Globalisation”, Theory, Culture & Society 2015 (1–14)