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Behind the Back of the Eye
An excerpt from an essay “The Configuration of Perception in Modern Slovenian Theatre”

What happens when viewers themselves become objects of the gaze and together with the performers find themselves within their own field of perception? Such a situation was created by Bojan Jablanovec in Would Would Not (2005), the fourth event in the series of seven performances of deadly sins named Via Negativa. With this project, Jablanovec abandoned theatre as an art of representation and creation of stage illusion (he ended his engagement with drama theatre when he embarked on the Via Negativa project). For Jablanovec, theater as a realm of aesthetic representation no longer holds attraction. He is interested in theater as a medium of communication among the participants in a theatre event, and in studying that which takes place between the performer and the viewer, as Grotowski would say, whose performative method gave the name to Via Negativa. However, Jablanovec’s Via Negativa does not follow the aesthetics of Grotowski’s methods, but rather the ethical imperatives which find expression with regard to the performer and the viewer. Seven deadly sins are just a framework for the study of the dynamics relationship between the performers and the viewers (1). The first three events (Wrath, 2002; More, 2003, and Incasso, 2004) approached this relationship primarily through the issues of representation (the method of representing the subject, the performativity of language, the search for the site of theatricality, deconstruction of events etc.), while in Would Would Not, it is the viewer’s perception that is in the foreground. While in the past Jablanovec saw perception as a result of the transaction in signs that flow between the performers and the viewers, he now approaches perception as a process of opening the channels of vision. In so doing he most explicitly, and perhaps most profoundly reaches into the viewer’s space, i.e. his/her body. In the studies of wrath (Wrath), gluttony (More), and greed (Incasso), the constellation of relationships among participants was such that the viewers were left on the other side, meaning outside presentation. In the study of lust (Would Would Not), the viewers – although still sitting in the auditorium facing performers – are introduced into the field of vision in a way that they are visible to themselves and to the others (performers and other viewers), so they themselves are subject to (self)observation.

In Would Would Not, Bojan Jablanovec is no longer the director of the event as he was in the first two parts of Via Negativa that took place at the intersection of theatre and performance. He is now the organizer of a performative (non-theatrical) play deliberately located in the world of trans-aesthetics. He addresses the viewers as sexual beings. The performance begins with music, strawberries and wine, as if it were a party, and the viewers are invited to join the performers in experiencing their intimate desires. The performers use various passive-aggressive strategies in an attempt to involve viewers into the play (the play cannot be accomplished without viewers’ participation) while strictly observing the principle that one who rejects cooperation is not pressed to join in but is allowed to assume the role of the observer. Yet this position is not voyeuristic, since the auditorium is brightly lit, so throughout the performance the viewers are visible to both the performers and other viewers. The situation that suits this aim is established by the actress Barbara Matijević during the first ‘full frontal’ scene. She slowly discards clothes all the while glancing seductively at the audience and then sits on the chair uncovered. She continues to seduce the viewers glancing at them for some time and eventually puts on the sunglasses so that they can no longer see her eyes and do not know who she looks at. At
that moment, the perception relations are turned upside down. The viewers in the auditorium no longer have control over the represented; we ourselves become the viewed ones. We are placed in the position of Sartre's voyeur who is caught by surprise by the gaze of the Other.

In L'Être et le Néant (1943), Jean-Paul Sartre distinguishes between two types of looking. One occurs when the voyeur peeps through a keyhole in the door and is so absorbed in what he sees that he has no awareness of his own existence and his own being »evaporates«. Sartre's voyeur is the same as the observer in Diderot who is fully immersed in the scene: his self is transposed to the observed world and he forgets about himself as an observer. The second type of looking begins at the moment when the voyeur is taken by surprise by the gaze of the Other. The voyeur becomes aware that he himself is observed, perceives himself as a spectacle for the Other and this awareness that he exists for the Other creates in him the awareness of the self. The voyeur first experiences the loss of illusion that he is the master of the field of vision in which the world escapes his gaze. To be more precise, he is still the master of the situation, yet this situation acquires a new dimension. The unexpected gaze of the Other disorientates the voyeur, since it fully changes the coordinates of his perception. It introduces a new aspect into the situation, which the voyeur now sees differently than a few moments earlier. He recognizes that he himself is part of the field of vision and is therefore himself exposed to gaze. So the situation escapes his gaze, because he becomes aware that he himself is a sensational image for the Other. This is precisely what the viewers experience at the first full frontal scene in Would Would Not. When Barbara Matijević begins to observe us from behind her dark glasses, our perspective from which we have observed the event until then changes. We begin to perceive ourselves as part of the spectacle. While a few moments earlier the performer has been a spectacle for us, now we become a spectacle for her. The presence of viewers, taken for granted in a theater, acquires a performative value. The performer assumes the role of the Other, normally reserved for the audience of a theatre show. Being subjected to her gaze, we can no longer be invisible viewers observing from a distance an event outside us in the manner of a voyeur. This is the situation Jablanovec wants to create for us: he attempts to involve us in the play, place us inside our fields of perception, so that we become visible to others and to ourselves and so that we experience ourselves during the act of observation.

Sartre's concept of gaze has been revised in a key point by Lacan. The voyeur who has been surprised by the gaze of the Other does not experience himself as part of the spectacle, but also discovers that he is a »subject in a function of desire.« (3) Jablanovec attempts to constitute the viewer as a subject of desire rather than the subject of a reflexive awareness. The performers assuming phantasmic identities and presenting the expressions of lust are just a »trap« set to catch the desires of the audience and ascribe to it the role of the subject of desire. The individuals who are needed to accomplish the scenes that represent the satisfaction of sexual desires are chosen from among the audience. The performer's partner is not another performer but a viewer. The scenes of lust are just a challenge for the viewers and a groundwork employed to shift events to the audience. At the third performance in the series, this was perhaps most obvious in the scene in which a dangerous body-art action came close to being accomplished: a volunteer viewer held a hammer over Kristian Al Droubi’s penis with the performer assuring her that he had everything under control and encouraging her to use her tool and nail the organ to the board, when another viewer called from the auditorium and stopped the action. The meaning does not lie in the accomplishment of the action, but in the study of the dynamics of relationships among the participants created by a specific situation.

Is it possible to satisfy an intimate desire that is uncovered and exposed in a public space? The question of whether it is possible to realize a desire within the scopic field is in fact
the question of whether it is possible to open up and establish contact with oneself under the gaze of the Other. Two scenes are paradigmatic in this respect. The first involves performer’s identity and it was explicated by Marko Mandić. After failing to reach an orgasm through masturbating in front of the audience, he states: »It is hard to be Marko Mandić.« The performer »establishes in front of the viewer a ‘third body’ which is neither the performer himself nor his role, but a being that intertwines with itself and its stage presence having contact with the audience, which is sometimes more and sometimes less than itself and its role.« (4) The performer’s »third body,« as Blaž Lukan calls it, is a body that does not belong to the performance personae Marko Mandić nor to Marko’s authentic self. It is a product of a specific visual order in which the performer opens himself/herself up as one who is visible and shares the viewer’s gaze from the inside. Another example of the failed attempt to establish contact with oneself, as Lukan would say, involves the identity of the viewer who took part in this play. When Sanela Milošević managed to arouse the penises of two volunteers, their experience was the same as that of Marko Mandić despite the fact that they faced away from the auditorium and did not need to meet our gaze. The volunteers sensed and shared our gazed, which probably enforced them to shift to their »third bodies.« Finally, what can be said about the audience in the auditorium who is within the field of its own perception and is aware that it is visible and integrated into the strategy of representation? Does not every spectator in the auditorium have a kind of »third body« inhabited neither by their authentic selves nor their Viewer role, but by a being that feels that it is visible, meaning exposed to performers’ invitations, on the one hand, and to the eyes of other viewers, on the other, all the while being subject to their own gazes as well? The attendants at the event find ourselves in the same existential paradox as performers, and the reason is the establishment of the specific circumstances of perception. We are made visible, meaning visible not to others only but to ourselves as well, and we see ourselves as viewed/visible. Within this intersubjective relationship with the participants in the event, cocooned inside the fabric of the (performative) play, we sense ourselves as a source of the coordinates of perception, and literally so. Our »third body« becomes the converging point of viewpoints projected by performers and perspectives we have at our disposal as subjects who are split between our own selves and the role of the Viewer. The productivity of the gaze in Would Would Not arises precisely from the split within the subjective point of view, which on the one hand, is nested in one’s own self (which is a combination of individually, socially, historically and culturally conditioned traits), and on the other, embedded in the role of the Viewer who is clearly aware of his/her own position of perception. The main reference with respect to which the viewer interprets an event is not the actors’ portrayal of lust, but the subjective viewpoint of an individual. What an individual sees is the his/her own self as a subject of desire which, in essence, is tied to the desire of the Other. Jablanovec shatters the very apparatus of the voyeuristic gaze determined by consensuses, norms, imperatives and desires. He does this in order to enable the viewer to recognize himself/herself as involved in the relationship, to become aware of his/her personal and social place in the web of intersubjective relationships and to recognize his/her own mechanisms of perception.