Everyone who plays a role lives through the gaze of the other — always, every day, and not only in the theatre. We are accustomed to our primary selves in our environment — they give structure to the so-called “normal” condition of the world. The roles and behaviour patterns we play in life are in one way or another expected, but when someone steps out of the “normal” structured system it causes a short circuit, excess, moralism, scandal (at least if it doesn’t happen in the theatre). This occurred, for example, when Slovenia turned into a nation of puritans at the sight of a group of men dressed in stewardess uniforms. The path of human expectation and accepted “norms” is the rigid equalizer. The fact that the order of “normality” is fragile and fluid is not always visible to the naked eye. It is necessary to read between the lines, in the in-between space that is usually filled to capacity with mimicry, pretence, poses. And who knows better than professional actors (or transvestites who routinely jump into the role of the opposite sex) how to adopt alien stories to oneself? Some receive their behavioural code from the script and others define it in their own way but in either case they all play their “roles” dictated by an inner urge. The withdrawal from the given structure of “normality” is justified but only if it ends with a return to the starting point. That is the basic question of identity.

This is the back story of Via Negativa, a group that renounces the conventional theatrical stage and whose performative topos penetrates the cube of the Moderna galerija gallery spaces. This back story comprises a distinct and parallel story to the presented images. The juxtaposition of exhibition and theatrical performance does not detract from either element. On the one hand, the terrorizing principle of Via Negativa is directed toward the detonation of the received gallery model of perceiving art. On the other, the theatre is smoothly integrated into the visual idiom and can be observed as just another specimen of exhibition. Ultimately, it is still fundamentally performative and its theatrical nature is immanent.

Via Negativa deviates from theatrical convention, the repetition of which has constructed an illusion of false authenticity. Yet it does not function as a negative utopia (as did Marko Pelhan’s 1992 Egoritem, an example of an early post-socialist independent production that also used the topos of Ljubljana’s Moderna galerija). It is instead a “legitimate” artefact with its own purpose and goal. Nevertheless, the goal of Via Negativa is similar to that Pelhan’s work: to provide a reflection of a “new subjectivity” that is increasingly aware of the roles it plays (both social and purely individual). The actors become a sort of living gallery exhibition whose performances are communicated using labels on which their names are written. The labels are set beside the actors as if the actors themselves are sculptures.

Petra Govc was Petra Govc yesterday and the day before yesterday. She was Petra Govc this morning and there is no reason why she won’t appear before us this evening as Petra Govc. But as it happens, there is no Petra Govc this evening. Her collaboration with the project has been interrupted because of her pregnancy. Barbara Kukovec, who is Petra’s understudy, appears instead of her. She puts on the gifts that Petra received when she gave birth (the reason for her absence!). Though the size of Petra’s clothing and shoes are hardly an exact fit, Barbara nevertheless assumes Petra’s role and we
accept Barbara’s simulation of Petra. Barbara “lends” her body to Petra’s soul. She feigns exile from her original role. The “original” self withdraws so that her body can allow the other self in; her body (temporarily) becomes a vessel. Thus the actor’s body and the “usurping” soul construct an identity that is otherwise artificial and unreal – this is the seemingly self-evident convention on which the theatre is constructed. Hidden in the corner, but always present, is the mind of the primary Self that controls the transfer. For this reason, the actor is, at least in principle, capable of stepping back into her Primary self at any moment. But identity between the Self and the played role is interrupted. It has to do with the acquisition and disposition of identities. The space in Moderna galerija accommodates a fixed number of roles that have the character of free-floating entities, each without specific attachment, without a roof, without even a central body. Something occurs in the work of Via Negativa, a sort of release of the spirit in the gallery space where disembodied souls grab bodies and move into them.

Under the integrated directorial strategy of Bojan Jablanovec, the conceptual back-up of Nana Milčinski, and the dramaturgical assistance of Saša Helbel, the Via Negativa acting team works in fifteen-minute segments. Intimate, radical, symptomatic. One could be banal and guess at the origins of the internal personality structure of each actor but such a simplified connection to the stage illusion is radically exploded in Via Negativa. The “anti-path” occurs on two levels: on the level of continual withdrawal from theatrical convention and on the essential level of the actor and his individual experience as revealed by the material.

Because events are sometimes guided by coincidences (even if only conditionally), we have twice encountered Barbara Kukovec through Via Negativa. But at the same time, Barbara K. would like to convince us that she is someone else. At the beginning of the performance, it was announced to the audience that Petra Govc would not be appearing because she was literally “experiencing” the narrative of her own story. Barbara K., like Olga Grad in the non-serial monodrama of Olga Grad vs. Juanna Regina (also conceived and directed by the tandem Jablanovec/Milčinski), is caught in the play within the play. She tells us about Petra’s great happiness, shows us the gifts and greeting cards Petra received on the occasion of her baby’s birth, puts on Petra’s maternity clothes. She puts on a dress and (too large) high-heeled shoes, she pulls on a pair of rubber gloves and stuffs some pyjamas under her dress. She shows the musical greeting cards and stuffs sweets into her mouth (which she then spits into a plastic bag). Her entry into Petra’s situation is basic and does not shift into the Pacino-like sphere where actor and role completely merge. What we see instead is an illustration that leaves the impression of Petra G. but does not entail a complete transformation. What is essential is the entirely rational attitude of Barbara K. to her own situation. As an (almost) graduate of AGRFT (the Academy of Radio, Film, and Television), she is, of course, prone to falling into the trap of theatrical role-playing and even feeling comfortable in it – though what kind of wrath would then compel her?

Gregor Zorc brings a vase with him, shakes stones out of it, arranges the stones in a rectangle, places the vase inside the rectangle, lights a candle in it, covers it with a pan that creates the impression of a lantern, drips some sort of oil onto the pan, and sprinkles kernels of corn into it until they start to pop into popcorn. The effect is borderline, “funereal”, somewhat morbid, part Monty Pythonesque, part “Zorcian”, and characterized by the penetrating moan of trumpets as an open valve for rage (which enters the field of wrath). The situation, in keeping with the stripped-down concept of performance focused on the actor alone, is a metaphor for the confrontation with family tragedy that defines each and every one of us. It is experientially powerful and far-reaching, consistently performed in a decent way without an iota of pathos. Zorc’s ritual form of mourning is hidden behind U-2 style sunglasses. The connection with death and
its inevitability accumulates in the emotional content of human wrath. Wrath, the first of the seven sins that are schematized in the seven-part/seven-year theatrical series of Via Negativa, is characterized by Zorc’s attitude toward the facts that man must accept. Because every external expression of wrath is a barren anachronism, Zorc’s reaction to the “logic” of the world is of a different kind: protest from a distance, a muted wrath that corrodes man from the inside out.

In one way or another, the majority of presented theatrical studies engage more or less directly with form. Form, despite being “castrated” or null in principle, nevertheless represents a particular foundation. Without a perfect vessel/form, there is nowhere to pour the content. Primož Bezjak experiences his suffering through a knee injury incurred ten years ago. Today he is able to work as a dancer, without any assistance and without a double. Today his physical form is able to be a vehicle for content, an outcome that given his injured knee did not seem likely several years ago. Indeed, today everything is alright – despite the thick pile of medical tests that predicted a different outcome. A decade after the insidious injury, life experience forces him to adopt a sceptical position toward the mound of medical evidence and recommendations. Life itself seems to have gone out of joint.

Gaber Trseglav says something about the warm floor the purpose of which is its warmness (and its comfort), and about the flowers that we must water. Or not forget to water. But he pours so much water into the flower pot that it runs onto the warm floor. And because the “mono-actor” has nothing to wipe it up with, he undresses and uses his clothes to happily blot out the wetness and wipe up the water. Then, without batting an eye, he puts on his soaking wet clothes as if nothing has happened. He is satisfied: “Our house is the most beautiful.” Of course, the form must remain pristine, intact, the content behind the form being (safely/falsely?) hidden under the skin in the pretence of comfort.

In her etude, Iva Babić continues in this direction. She plays a well-tended pregnant woman, saturated on the cognitive level by propaganda messages that ensure a perfect physical condition that is close to the ideal of Greek antiquity. Yet the dry tone of the summarized advertisements actually belies their content. Iva B. functions as a well-designed fact that an aggressive advertising machine has reduced to a speaking robot. In truth, Babić has avoided the condition of the media “horror vacui” that attempts to dominate her and take away her autonomy. She has instinctually internalized the logic of consumption. She speaks of the cosmetic methods that enfold/protect/warm/anoint her body but remains disassociated from the parts of the body that seem to belong to someone else. Infection with the marketing forces of logos is the reality from which, like it or not, everything emerges. It is the system of the world and whoever tries to resist the system appears to be off the rails. The design element is the fate of Iva B. and when she is pregnant even more so. It is only her rational mind that makes her sceptical of the miracles promised by the advertising world and, performing before the Via Negativa audience, this appears to be ambivalence. But the tone of her words is void of meaning, the thoughts carried in them wedged in the subtext. Is this the condition of Iva Babić? Does a certain apathy stalk her and cling to her like a clown advertisement? Iva B. is a tragic prototype of contemporary humanity, distanced from the authentic, longing to belong to the dominant society of the day. She is bombarded by the intrusive cosmetics and fashion industries, contaminated by the tactics of consumption. Her reality is intermingled with the megalomaniacal invention, the gallery of Iva Babić being only the latest product of an impeccably constructed advertising narrative.

The study of Marko Mandić tackles a similar theme although in a more coded way: how to arrive at “true” human connection, how to achieve an authentic kiss, as if biting
through saran wrap in which a chocolate surrogate is wrapped? The wrapping of the candy offers a piece of paper on which New Age wisdom is written, wisdom that in its generality could mean nothing or everything. Is “this” actually authentic? When is the external form truly in sync with the individual perception of its content?

In Via Negativa, the connection between the body and its role disintegrates. Actors create forms and begin to indirectly mock them, occasionally also trying to “disrupt” the “order” of a world that values form above all.

After five (or, including Maribor, six) performances of these “original” theatrical etudes, the chain of actors suddenly snaps. The rules of “role-playing” are transformed. Each actor jumps into the role of another actor and becomes his or her copy. Barbara Kukovec becomes Primož Bezjak and speaks about his wounded knee. Her performance as the approximation of Bezjak’s “original” is thus only the next copy of a subject that does not exist. (Only) at the Maribor performance did the so-called “gallery effect” occur, which is to say that theatrical politesse was silenced and viewers began to freely walk through the gallery rooms during the presentation of the individual “copies”.

The situation at the May 9 performance was entirely different: Petra Govc had recovered from giving birth but now Iva Babić is gone. Here we again have the form of the play within a play in which roles are consciously assumed. Barbara K. continues to represent Petra Govc. But the real Petra Govc, i.e. the subject of Barbara’s representation, now exists and watches with amusement until she herself assumes the role of the absent Iva Babić who in the meantime has “switched” with the birthing mother. The play is entirely alienating, free of representation, the significand present only as an idea that the signifier does not approach as a believer. Words become dry, expendable, needed only as audio scenery. The intentionality of the theatrical representation is entirely suppressed; Barbara Kukovec’s method is precisely non-intentionality, nothing of classical theatre since she offers no fiction but only acquisitive exhibition. She deconstructs Petra Govc with the birth gifts, just as Gaber Trseglav in the concluding “rapture” scene triggers a comic reaction with his affected transformation into Iva Babić. Is the world therefore composed of you and me, the freckly friend and a schoolmate from primary school, the sanctimonious neighbour and your father’s lover, or is it roles that fulfil the world: cliché, subversive, familial, professional, loving, sexual? Via Negativa provides a lucid insight behind the wall of the visible and allows us to see beneath the surface of the world in which we live. Was the world ever different or has it always been more evident in our new “artificial world”, in the new hierarchy of our post-modern surroundings (referred to in the Shakespeare monolog All the world’s a stage)? The Grotowski convention is the actor’s principle and supporting beam of the theatre. Without actors there is no theatre; only the actor can give flesh to the word. The Jerzy Grotowski method defies the theatrical norms of the mainstream. This process of defiance, named “via negativa”, is an “abolishing process” that on the path to performance erases all obstacles and removes all disturbing factors for the actor. It is a conscious principle. At a certain point, the mainstream theatrical model and this counter-model began to run parallel to each other. Via Negativa eliminates all that is unnecessary. The actor is the alpha and the omega – the actor is the only necessary mechanism in the performance.

In this era that is the end of time and man, the various concepts and visionary prophecies of theatre are amalgamated into a grand cosmogony indirectly revealed by the opus of Bojan Jablanovec. From this eclectic method, theatrical artists can derive all the elements to create their own image. We find in Via Negativa a certain Artaudian lyricism of signs, an indirect form of Brechtian social engagement, and the great idea of the actor as the prime vehicle of the theatre. The theatre functions ascetically and
simply, unconcerned with the dimensions of spectacle. It has to do with theoritization of the theatrical arts that is a tool for practitioners of contemporary theatre; by focussing on the potential of intensive emotions and spiritual transactions between the actor/performance and the audience. Artaud’s concept of “the cruel theatre” and “via negativa” as well as the acting techniques of Jerzy Grotowski (sometimes characterized as Artaud’s natural heir) all fall into this category. Today, actually changing the social system with theatre is an illusory goal. As Jablanovec follows Grotowski, he is aware of this and does not pursue a uniform definition of theatre reduced to one dimension where all directorial exhibitions of content are the same. This artistic practice implicitly negates the conventional theatrical system, the Western mode of “producing” theatre, and Western post-capitalism that situates culture and theatre as its appendage. The potential function of these artistic practices is, as is well-known, negligible. Via Negativa does not represent excess; it creates its own theatrical space from scratch. Nothing is explained to the audience; none of the actors present the truth in the pleasant form of illusion; each member of the audience sees his or her own version of the performance, determined by his or her own affinities and conditions, side by side with the other audience members.

Via Negativa presents to the audience what the truth would be in an ordered world where people are beautiful, healthy, satisfied, and their spiritual condition is exemplary. Everyone is part of some idealized reality that is like sand in the eyes, surrounds each of us with a kind of scepticism. Reasons for the wrath of each individual are implicit in these studies. The essence of these laboratory-based theatrical etudes resides “beneath” the language of words. Today good art must be read between the lines; it is situated in the places in between. The persona is not found in its expected place and form, but the role remains. And with this role we can do what we like. We can make a pretence of it. We can present the (missing) persona through the manipulation of the role.

In terms of both spirit and generation, Via Negativa is an extremely youthful project. It has an absolute freshness and unique place in the current Slovenian theatrical time and space. It offers proof that experimental tendencies in Slovenian theatre are not dead. The constant interchangeability of roles accentuated by the fluidity of the actor’s existence, the tension and the perception of the gallery spaces, the mixture in which it is possible to catch sight of tiny patterns in the development of the theatre in the twentieth century (though in a non-binding manner). Above all, Via Negativa shows a faith in the actor as the alpha and omega of theatrical creation.

Via Negativa is an essentially non-verbal performance – it lives from the absence of the persona about whom it speaks.