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The Real in Jablanovec.
Eight Projects, Eight Observations

Artifact

Let's begin at the end. There is an artifact in front of me: a black box with an inscription on the black-upholstered inside which reads "You know what you want". A 100 tolar note is squeezed between two plexi-glass sheets. The signature reads Katarina Stegnar. The note is smeared with actress's blood and now, almost one and a half year later, its color has turned brown. Someone opening the box without knowing where it came from would say that the note is brownish dirty (in fact, the color is reminiscent of excrement). To those who know, this object says more: it is an artistic "vestige" of the performance entitled Incasso which was auctioned, or rather purchased after the show. The actresses' blood is her "performative" contribution to the scene she played. The symbolic theatrical act thus (also) produced something absolutely real; an aesthetic 'delusion' left behind a material vestige. The performance, deposed by time, excluded from its flow and relocated to non-time, to the realm of memory, has been immortalized symbolically in an artifact. That artifact is the performance in a nutshell bought at the premiere in order to anchor it in reality and cover up the horrors of memory. Nevertheless, the black box remains just a delusion, an allusion to something that was once real, so it is itself fading into memory. Yet it seems that it could become 'real' – although I know that it won't – if its function changed, for example, if it accepted a new content, "live" money, a memento, or everyday "dust." The real produced its own delusion that is embodied in an artifact, a delusion of the real.

Conceptualist mega-project

The project by Bojan Jablanovec, which took its name from Grotowski's syntagm Via Negativa ("not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks"), is "megalomaniac" at first glance: eight performances over eight years (2002-2009). Until now we could see Starting Point: Wrath (2002), More (2003), Inkaso (2004) and Would and Would Not (2005). At the beginning is the starting point, and at the end Via nova, the pick of the series. In between, and including the first performance, are seven deadly sins (wrath, gluttony, greed, lust, sloth, envy, pride), as an "allegory of the whole in its completeness," performed in accordance with the conceptualist principles and equipped with the essential "ideological apparatus." The latter employs modern theatrical concepts – the basics of theatricality, the relationship actor-spectator, post-dramatic performative strategies, the reduction of stage presence, positive disposition towards the audience etc. Its methodological field is delineated by seven deadly sins, a collection of basic human characteristics on which the actors draw, so they are the source and the authors of their play. Yet Jablanovec's project is megalomaniac only at first glance. Via Negative is a conceptualist mega-project whose essential point of differentiation and the source of its meaning is its "slow" progress, or to put it differently, the diachrony of its 'taking place now' and its continual cross-referencing that is made possible by temporality itself, which, in turn, moves it from conceptual linearity to symbolic synchronicity.

Although it wants to encompass "basic human traits," its "real essence" becomes
revealed in something that is much smaller than the concept but by no means inferior. Just in passing, let me mention that this phenomenon, or a paradox, is frequently encountered in conceptualist projects: once they chart their path of progress, they frequently (I’ll avoid saying ‘as a rule’) stray from that path, with those most auto-reflexive even charting the path with the clear intention of straying from it. What is problematic is not this artistic lapse in itself, which is quite usual, but insistence on the concept even in subsequent interpretations, or engagement in polemics over “erroneous” (critical) perceptions which overlook the concept or exceed it, or, still better, perceptions that take as the point of departure the performance as an act of presentation rather than conceptualization. These perceptions see the performance rather than the concept, although they are aware that the concept can be “fine” in itself.

However, at the time of transformation into performance, the concept becomes distributed essentially determining the signifying regime of the performance which thus fully "substitutes" the concept. Accordingly, an attempt at defining the “smaller than the concept” in Jablanovec’s performances seems to be a greater challenge than “itemizing” the archaeology of the sin which is constituted more or less expressively throughout the project. The outcome of this attempt, of course, remains open to question, much like the outcome of the project itself which is currently halfway towards completion.

**Via Negativa with Badiou**

To use a paradox: the real within Jablanovec’s project is revealed in appearance. According to Badiou (this text is the third in a row and the last in the series that approaches theater through Badiou’s inaesthetics), theater is in the first place the art of mask, of appearance, whereby he has in mind primarily Brecht’s theater, emblematic of the 20th century. According to Badiou, theater mask, or appearance, symbolizes the significance of the lie in the 20th century, or, in a more narrow sense, the relationship between the passion for the real and the necessity of appearance. Brecht’s theater actualized the interspace between the play and the real and dismantled the fundamental ties that link the real with the appearance and that arise from the fact that appearance is a realistic principle of embedding the real, or that which localizes and makes visible the brutal effects of its contingency. For Badiou, keeping distance is the axiom of 20th century art, since what is involved is turning the power of fiction into fiction, so that the effect of delusion appears as the real. The gap between the real and an appearance of the real (much like the gap between a ruling power and a ruling ideology, which, however, is not the subject of our interest in this essay), gives rise to artistic gestures that were impossible in the past, so what once has been the waste product of art is now presented as art. Badiou draws on Hegel when answering the question of the function of appearance in the passion for the real. The real, understood as the contingent absolute, is never sufficiently real to avoid raising doubts about the appearance. The passion for the real necessarily involves suspicion. Nothing can prove that the real is truly real save for the system of fiction where it will play the role of the real. The role of appearance is to expose the brutality of the real, whereby we do not have any formal criteria for distinguishing the real from the appearance, that is, nothing apart from nothingness: only nothingness is not suspicious, because it does not point to the real. And, the only act that does not create in us suspicion about its reality is death, although not in theater; there, death can be simulated.

Badiou derives the thesis that the 20th century was, not only in politics, but in art as well, a century of destruction that took two directions: destruction as purification and destruction as subtracting; it attempts to measure the inevitable negativity; a subtracting thought can conquer the blind imperative of destruction and purification. To illustrate the protocol of subtraction, Badiou uses Malevich’s “White square on white”,
which is in the field of painting the climax of purification that manifests a zero difference between white and white, the difference of the same that can be called a disappearing difference. However, this is not the destruction of painting but acceptance of subtraction. What is real in this process is not identity of the real but an interspace, a minimal one. The passion for the real that is based on identity is the passion for authenticity that can be accomplished only as destruction, which also represents its limit. The differentiating and the differentiated passion for the real, compared to maximal destruction, establishes a minimal difference which it tries to axiomatize. Or, to return to Malevich, subtracting acts must invent a new content to fill in the place of the minimal difference, where there is almost nothing.

The Non-space of Via Negativa

What is then ‘real’ in Jablanovec’s project? Where do his performances take place? The site of his performances is a gallery, an empty space of the experimental theater. It is a non-institutional stage with all the needed equipment, but naked: space as a fully equipped abstraction in which there is nothing that would direct one towards the performance or theater in the sense of illusion. Jablanovec’s space is a space ready to accept the real; the space as such vanishes. In our perception it appears merely as a non-definable background, as a light (which, however, doesn’t know light effects; its intensity remains level most of the time, or, in other words, it illuminates the stage and the auditorium neutrally), or as time, duration. The first performance in the series, Starting Point: Wrath, is perhaps an exception in this regard, because it incorporated the context of the event, i.e. the gallery and the exhibits that even directed the actor’s choice. The space of Via Negativa is hence a kind of non-space, or perhaps even a pre-space, meaning an endless nothing that waits to be filled with some (new) life, the allegory of the real. To be more precise, In Jablanovec’s performances there occurs a kind of de-territorialization; attention is redirected from the macrocosm to the microcosm, i.e. the body. The space of Via Negativa is sooner or later the body, the body as omphalos, meaning the point of the (severed) link with the uterus, the body-in-a-chain, the body of bodies, or the body as life, anima – through which via (negativa) becomes vita (negativa). Or, it is the body as oikos, as (the only) home, a refuge, a cavity or an aperture where life is “at home.” In Jablanovec’s project, the body is an opening, the negative image of the space, and a result of fundamental subtracting – Jablanovec calls it reduction – where the (new) time of the performance becomes anchored.

The de-territorialization thesis is further supported by the fact that the viewers of Jablanovec’s series find themselves in a kind of non-political and even non-social space which is marked by the relationship between the public and the private sphere, but not in the political or social sense. It is invariably a space for emphatic theatrical communication where the “media” component is especially pronounced. Jablanovec intentionally directs viewers’ attention by introducing various guiding strategies, ranging from a simple and implicit guided tour of the gallery (Starting Point: Wrath) to masters of ceremony (More and Incasso) to ‘agreed economy’ of viewers’ participation in the performance (Would Would Not). Although the last mentioned strategy creates the impression of viewers’ contribution, apparently dispelling all doubts, its purpose is to make the audience passive and stiff, and to take it away from the context and redirect its gaze towards appearance with which Jablanovec replaces the reality of the space. Despite being continuously in the “spotlight,” the viewers at Jablanovec’s performance can nevertheless hide within their own perception which is continually filled with the specific dynamics of the relationship between voyeurism and exhibitionism into which they are gently pushed by Via Negativa. Jablanovec’s de-territorialization is thus also ex-territorialization, a throw-out, but back into one’s own body.
In addition, Jablanovec’s performances are no stranger to certain “political” re-territorialization. Look at their geography: when selecting the places for their guest performances (they do not have their own physical space; they have no ‘home’; perhaps their only home is their web ‘domain’) they look for modern, or (formerly) avant-garde settings, and post-modern environments reminiscent of ‘supermarkets’. On the other hand, the list of places visited so far (Podgorica, Novi Sad, Beograd, Zagreb) suggests that in a certain respect these performances are re-assembling the former common state, or the former shared home now ‘dismembered’ into extremities.

The Real As Surface

Furthermore, the real in Jablanovec’s performances reveals itself through something that can be named surface, in want of a better term. This superficiality is a consequence of a kind of absolute disclosure that occurs in these performances. The viewer frequently has a feeling that there is nothing behind the scene, in the background – everything is at the foreground and everything has the appearance of an unproblematic media, or art talk show; a succession of stand-up pieces, exhibitionist peep-shows or even reality shows, where everything, in an absolute sense, radiates from the display/screen, where neither the volume nor the background are important. The emotional glow of the covering, or ‘curtain’, to use Lacan’s allegory, i.e. the curtain as a complete illusion, conceals the ‘background,’ the space, the depth of field, and redirects attention to the body. The viewer is forced to immerse in the realm of corporeality, which amounts to a kind of a 360 degrees turn around the perception axis redirecting along the way attention to itself. Although at first glance the viewer’s position in Jablanovec’s performances is traditional, Jablanovec requires from the viewer a symbolic turn which is similar to the viewer’s real shift from the square of theatre box to the circle, to the space of play, or the situation as such. All of this is characteristic of 20th century theatre.

The notion of surface is paradoxical: despite being focused on the body it excludes tactile sensations (or enables them but in the way we experience them when using touch-screens), and it constitutes the viewer as a voyeur. In some cases, for example, in More, the viewers even choose the sequence of scenes, which brings them close to the position of players who insert the “object of their desire” into a video or DVD player establishing in this way their own territory of gaze. The surface suggested in Via Negativa by the frontal positioning with respect to the spectators is further reasserted by other performatve strategies, for example, addressing of the audience, actors’ mutual consideration of each other as an element of their supra-identification ‘technique,’ their appearances “out of the blue” (never resulting from the story) as in a puppet theatre show, and their vanishing over the edge of the space. Paradoxically, the very decision to stage the “fundamental human traits,” the very foundation of our humanity, causes a shift into a non-space, or even to the very border of humanity. Sin exists outside every space; it is a kind of floating performance hovering over the surface, always on the edge of the surface; it is an absent signifier which the representation of space attempts to simulate, a kind of helium balloon which, however, does not push upwards but downwards: Lacan’s spot. Jablanovec’s performers relate the story about humanity and sin as non-spatial bodies, as bodies-spaces, as flattened background, and as McLuhan’s media mirrors. But only this – along with the no less paradoxical ‘exposure’ of one’s own body and intimacy – enables their ‘recognition.’ Undoubtedly, it is sensible to point out that recognition takes place as a perception of ‘material substance’, as Žižek would say, behind the veil of self-presentation there is no substantial reality, no ‘essence.’

Linearity Of The Structure
The surface is also suggested by a certain linearity of Jablanovec's performances. The scenes follow one another as lines of events following the principles of parallel symmetry and a geometrical sequence. In certain cases (e.g. More), these lines partially overlap or merge, but this does not destroy the basic principle. Linearity produces several effects. First, it constitutes substitute spaces within the original non-space. These are 'streets' (the street was Jablanovec's stage set 'ideal' before the time of Via Negativa, for example, in staging of Pierre Corneille's L'Illusion comique, Slovene National Theatre, Celje 1993) along which the 'banal' real moves, the reality of everyday life. The lines also suggest the parallelism of para-spaces and create the illusion of volume, levels and planes, and finally, their rhythm fragmentizes events into temporal segments, creating the slices of time that frame events.

The structure of Jablanovec's performances is only apparently "primitive," or linear. The assembling of this structure is the basic condition for an appearance to work; an imperceptible sequence of 'scenes' in the performance follows the principle of the actual gaze of a viewer in the street who dissects an integral development into individual segments, but perceives these as one whole. This is similar to what we experience when watching an underground train pulling out of the station: a series of window-framed "stories" each consisting of the images of bodies and faces 'pasted' onto the lit surface of the glass. This is the principle of continual substitution where the next covers the previous, which, on the one hand, refutes the principle of ephemerality or temporality, and on the other, constitutes it anew. Or, to put it differently, this is time as such. Finally, in this way the passengers-performers become somehow isolated, absent, even 'departed', as Boris Grays wittily described the actors on the screen.

However, linearity cannot be attributed to Jablanovec's principle of repetition. The project Olga Grad vs. Juanna Regina (2001) introduced the "special conceptions" of individual performances or repetitions, now further varied in Via Negativa with the help of moderators who direct the show, a unique audience at each performance with whom the actors always anew "negotiate" the flow of events, and critical responses that govern 'corrections' in the structure, the progress of the performance or individual scenes. To put it differently, Jablanovec's projects interpret idiosyncratically the category or performative reiteration, whereby in reproducing 'one and the same thing' they reconstitute themselves anew to a certain extent. This is similar to what does Marina Abramović, who re-enacts certain well-known performances from the 1960s and the 1970s, transforming into harsh reality something that has long since been consigned to memory, and through this auto-multiplication process she produces always new delusions, an infinite chain of repetitions vanishing in Magritte's mirror.

**A Test Of Reality**

Derealization in itself does not inspire delusion, but it does give it a nudge. The most powerful 'mise-en-scene' shift in Jablanovec's performances is a minimal deflection from a body to a body, i.e. from the body of the representative to the body of the represented, from real intimacy to represented intimacy, fictitious intimacy, which through this becomes contingent again. A body in a space is never self-referencing. As Pavis says, only the stage machinery is self-referencing, or the auditorium as a space. Stage presence is always transitory, duplicated in dual exposition, retreating through a spiral turn into the perspective of the background and into its 'whiteness', into the "difference with respect to itself", or into subtraction that projects into it a new " corporality." Generally, the acting process could be divided into several phases. Pavis call the first phase sous-partition, which could be understood as sub- or pre-manifestation, and he sees the actor as a reservoir or a web of associations. Actually, it enables his/her "stable" presence on the stage. Presence is the presence of actor as such; an actor's role is a
medium of transcodification (after Elam), and all of this is realized through the relationship between the actor and the role that takes the form of identification or distance. On the level of perception, a process of communication takes place between the performer and the viewer which Schaffer calls “fantasy negotiations.” This involves a constant degree of dissatisfaction to which the fictitious, ludist world is continually adjusted, which is made possible by, or which makes possible, the continuation of the play. Similar negotiations take place within the performers themselves, whose presence is constituted through the dual denial or shift; the actor’s “not-not me” means “neither I nor Hamlet,” but also not some third thing (the so-called “third body” emerges only as a result of the productive contact between the performers and the viewers). Or, this third thing is, so we assume, Badiou’s appearance.

What can we learn from this “test of reality” conducted on Jablanovec’s performers, and what do these performers actually “show” us? We shall approach the answer step by step. The physical, public explicitness of the performers in Via Negativa is increasing with every performance. This holds true for both the explicitness of address and of corporality. In both examples, the performers adhere to the wish to open up, to uncover in the non-space of the show their bodies and turn them into the space of perception, of viewers’ pleasure. In the Starting Point: Wrath, speech mainly sufficed. In the succeeding projects, the bodies discarded various auto-biographical, cultural and civilizational deposits and reached the point at which they stood naked in front of the viewers. There is no need to draw attention, however, (and Jablanovec is aware of this) that the literal, explicit nakedness of the body as such does not reveal its physical manifestation but points to what lies behind it, or underneath it, that is, the actor’s pre-manifestation. Moreover, the degeneration of the body, its discharges or wastes, and its partial “destruction” enabled by the gap between the real and appearance, do not open the door into the body, although the body’s apertures lay wide open. Sperm, blood or urine on the stage can to a certain extent simulate the actor’s “inside” or “intimate self” (for example, the color of the urine is specific to the actor as is the taste of sperm), but these have a “higher” value. Speaking metaphorically with Laporte, the beautiful does not have a smell; the border between a stuffy smell and a nice smell is fragile, and there exists an “essence link” between the two; there exists an analogy between a perfume and excrement; the system of relations closely links together the figures of god, excrement and soul, and it is especially in dealing with excrements that “the colonization reflex,” as Laporte named it, comes into play. (12)

The body as such, with its discharges, conceals within itself more than that. It is not something that belongs not only to a performer, but also something that belongs not only to man. Non-body in a non-space thus uncovers something non-human, and that can only be nothingness. Inasmuch as the bodies of performers in Via Negativa point to nothingness, (or death), they stand in front of us as the only criteria that help us overcome the original suspicion concerning the real, or help us distinguish between the real and delusion. Still better, the performer’s uncovered body along with its discharges causes a minimal shift in which it can find its new contingency, and the same is experienced by the viewers. The performer and the viewer both hit upon a limit which leaves no possibility of repetition and beyond which it is not possible to simulate the real, or life as such, the border of death, of nothingness. To be a bit (demonically) visionary: Via nova, which will bring together “the best” from the previous projects, can only be an explicit “play about death,” about the real that is not possible to simulate. Therefore, in Via Negativa the intimate self of the performer is in the service of stating something, stating nothing, rather than stating so-called self, one’s own pre-manifestation as manifestation or a role. Despite this, the performers constitute themselves before the public as certain recognizable identities. Through installing themselves in the given space, or still better, through their ex-installation or exposition,
they attract the gaze of the viewers using specific representational strategies which are the creations of their own. This is not about stories or situations, but about defining the manners of presence and realizing the viewer’s wish. At first glance, all Via Negativa performances aim to fulfill a wish, to put it simply, or to show that which the viewer has long wanted to see but dared not ask for it; they are intended for doing what many have done as children, or in perverted dreams. It is, in brief, a kind of variety or cabaret style coquetry with the delicate, the obscene, the forbidden; it is a “shadow” theatre or a public psycho-analytic séance, perhaps even a mass “game” of truth with therapeutic effects. That is the first impression, and not completely unfounded. The pre-manifestation of performances is frequently “nightmarish” and “perverted,” since this is declaratively the “staging” of deadly sins that occupy a very precise place in our collective memory.

Despite all, every performer attracts the viewer’s attention through some specific trait characteristic of him/her only. I do not talk here about the performer presenting a “part of self,” which is not flesh, as Ovid would say, which is a maxim for actors in porno movies, or placing the viewer in a “third” position, also characteristic of porno movies, in which the male viewer does not identify with the male actor but, as Žižek concluded, with the position of pure gaze observing the woman who fully surrenders to pleasure. The point is not to show to the viewer the “real” pleasure attained through, say, masturbation (as in Would And Would Not), or to uncover “that” which resides beyond pleasure and takes us to supra-pleasure, to the supra-sensual and transcendental. The point is in what can be named an attempt at occupying a non-space, in want of a better definition. The occupation of a non-space is a battle for space, but it does not involve the process of placing oneself into a space, inserting oneself into a space. It is an operation that makes incision in the body, the carrying out of a “pure incision that separates the thing from itself.” The consequence of the incision is not the disappearance or destruction, but what Badiou named subtraction. We can only perceive ourselves as “we” through a minimal difference with regard to ourselves and to others, either as performers or viewers of Via Negativa. Or to borrow from Lacan, who recapitulated Freud on an occasion, we become “/…/ a mouth kissing itself.” The principle is both Aristotelian and Brechtian, and in some respect Artaudian, while tallying with Pfäffler’s theory of inter-passivity characteristic of virtual reality.

The Call of the Real

Let us conclude with the beginning. We are attracted to Jablanovec’s performances by the real. In an isolated theatrical space we experience a minimal shift from “life” into which we release desires in a manner of an animal released from the cage. Eroticism is not an effect but a prerequisite for the entry into our own negative. All virtues we assume we posses are left outside the theatre, and we arm ourselves with suspicion. We do not want to participate because we know that the play will take place without us just the same, but we still place ourselves at disposal, including that which is the most intimate and the most valuable: good name, clothes, sexual organs. Sometimes, halfway through the performance, we begin to believe that what we see is real, but this sensation is subdued by its opposite counterpart: all is delusion. We wish for more truth, more minimal shifts, more effects of the real, and that precisely in order to perceive a new real within the delusion, and to feel, let’s be straightforward, the weight of our back pressing against the seat, because at that moment that is the only proof that we are. We are attracted to Jablanovec’s performances by the fear that in the brutality of the real we shall perceive our reverse side, but as an illusion only. Nothing human is alien to us, but still, there is nothing more lonely than the humanity of another laying bare in front of us. We know that despite light and closeness we can isolate ourselves within our own wish, our own dark horror that dissolves our responsibility for it before making a decision.
The open text of Jablanovec’s performances is in fact a test of our readiness to accept ourselves, subtract from ourselves and then go on. Nothing fateful, the real thing, but worthy of trying.

**Glossary**

**Real/appearance** – The role of appearance is to reveal the brutality of the real, whereby there is no any formal criterion that would enable us to distinguish the real from appearance, save for nothingness.

**Deterritorialization** – In *Via Negativa*, attention is redirected from the macrocosm, or from space, to the microcosm, or the body.

**Non-space** – The decision to put on the stage the “fundamental human traits,” or the very foundation of humanity, causes a paradoxical shift of the performance into a non-space, or even to the very border of humanity.

**Surface** – The notion of surface, despite the focus being on the body, excludes tactility but constitutes the viewer as a voyeur.

**Linearity** – The structure of *Via Negativa* is only seemingly “primitive” and linear; the assemblage of scenes is a fundamental condition for appearance to function.

**Intimacy** – Intimacy is expressed through the attempt to conquer a non-space, which is in essence the battle for space. However, this is not the process of securing place, or intrusion into space, but the operation of incision in the body, acting out of a “pure cut that differentiates a thing from itself.”

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*5 Slavoj Žižek, Kako biti nihče, Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizbo, Ljubljana 2005, str. 10.*
*6 Boris Groys, »Opazovalec sam na sebi«, Maska, št. 3-4 (86-87), letnik XIX/2004, str. 52-56.*
*14 Prav tam, str. 1974.*
*15 Alenka Župančič, »Realno v igri«, Problemi, št. 1 – 2, let. XLIV /2006, str. 92.*

*Sodobne scenske umetnosti. Edited by Bojana Kunst and Petra Pogorevc. Ljubljana: Maska, 2006 (Zbirka Transformacije, 20).*