

# Performing gluttony: VIA NEGATIVA: ŠE (MORE)

Mojca Puncer

DIRECTED BY:  
BOJAN JABLANOVEC

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR:  
NANA MILČINSKI

VN RESEARCH CONCEPT:  
BOJAN JABLANOVEC  
IN NANA MILČINSKI

PERFORMED BY:  
DAŠA DOBERŠEK, PETRA GOVC,  
BARBARA KUKOVEC, JAKA LAH,  
BORIS MIHALJ, MATEJA PUCKO  
AND GREGA ZORC

PRODUCED BY VIA NEGATIVE;  
CO PRODUCED BY  
GLEJ THEATRE

Seven actors prepared thirteen performances. Each one is a personal statement in which the actor examines their own personal relationship to “sinful” gluttony as the basis of this particular research. The viewers choose and combine the individual performances by selecting the foods presented on stage. By choosing three edible foods, they select a maximum of three performances at one time, but they may also only select a pair or a solo. It is also possible that two scenes by the same actor are selected, in which case a copy is presented by one of the actors not in the chosen three. To ensure the selection process was fluent, it was moderated by professional hosts of popular radio and TV shows.

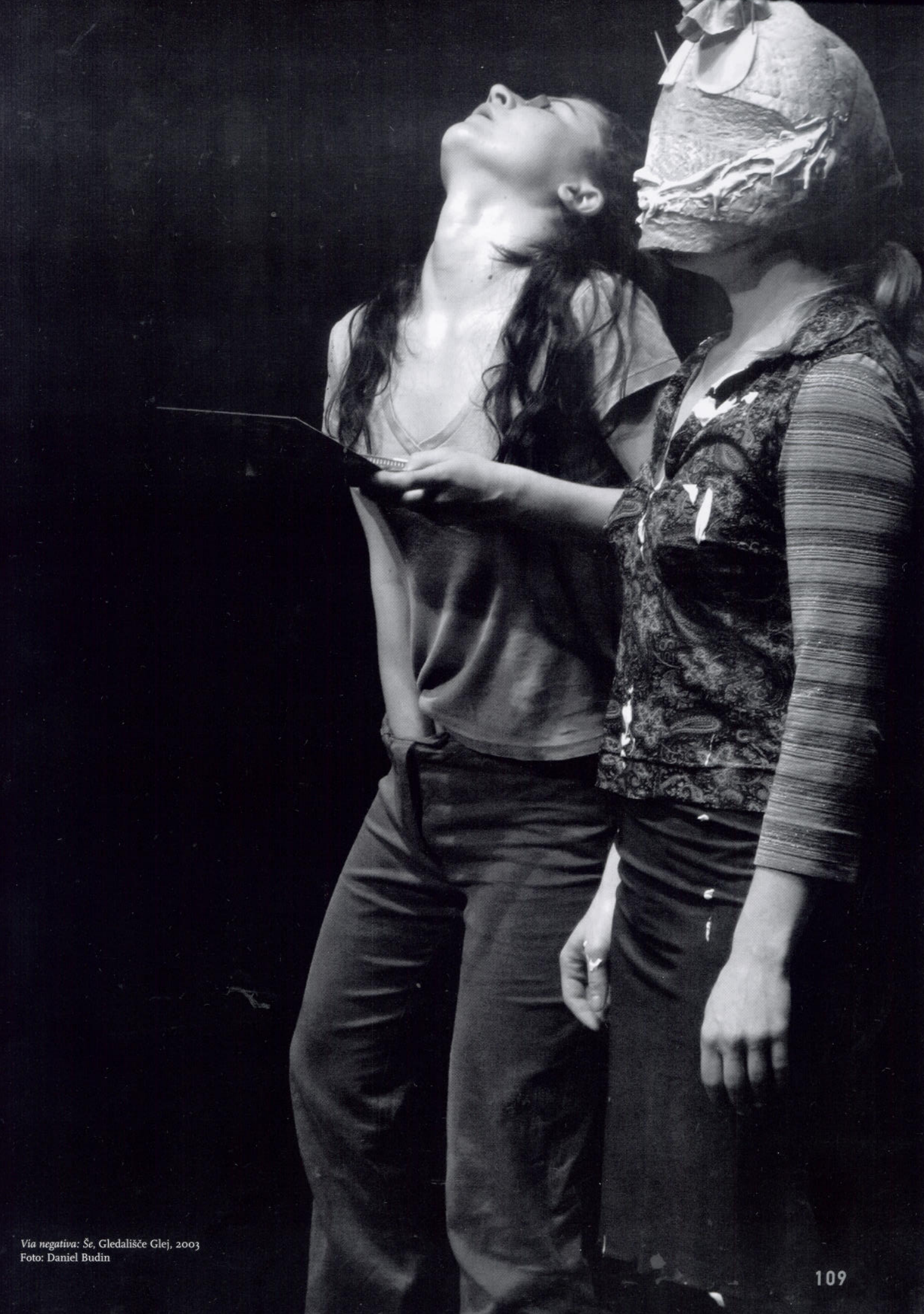
## “The body of theatre has no smell?”

The food used by the actors is a key element of the scenery and, at the same time, a symbol and a metaphor, enabling them to evoke a strong physical transfer: unexpectedly stimulated senses awaken the viewer’s taste, the aesthetic rather than the olfactory.

In his performance Jaka Lah crushes chips, ketchup and coca-cola into a disgusting gruel into which he then jerkily inserts his head, unambiguously hinting at *junk food*, a common and harmful companion in front of TV screens. Grega Zorc narrates a bizarre story of two acquaintances who died suddenly, all the while stuffing beetroot into his pockets, enumerating its medicinal properties. Barbara

Kukovec stuffs chocolates into her underwear after having closed her eyes with them in order to narrate a story about the powers of the delights of taste. Boris Mihajl tapes cold meats to his face in order to appear skinned. Daša Doberšek cleans fish in a strange ritual; Petra Govc preaches/enacts her reflections on feeding from the kitchen table to the grave; Mateja Pucko presents the vicious circle of eating for comfort, which always distorts into its own opposite etc. During all this the smells of the food used permeate the auditorium as much as the audio and visual sensations.

Food as a scenic element works distinctively through the olfactory senses, affecting the one sense that is usually not stimulated in theatre and thereby opening up new possibilities of identification to the viewer. These can be connected to disgust instead of to feelings of (aesthetic) pleasure. Smells are still traditionally not part of the hygiene-order-beauty triad, our civilization’s foundations<sup>1</sup>. Smell, being in contradiction to order and hygiene, evades beauty. That what is beautiful does not smell is a form with which the discourse of Kantian aesthetics (the disinterested judgment of taste enabled by the disembodied point of view) expresses the sublimation of all that in one way or another connects with excrement. The sense of smell is excluded from aesthetics as that which speaks about the alchemy of the circulation of matter. Edibility cannot be part of “good taste”. We may say about a dish that it is beautiful, which does not yet suggest its edibility – yet it is enough to ensure that food is not entirely excluded from the reaches of beauty. But smell does not go that far: it can



Via negativa: Še, Gledališče Glej, 2003  
Foto: Daniel Budin

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be good, pleasant, delicious, but it can't be beautiful. In the case of the performance discussed, the simultaneity of sensing is the gauge of the successful demolition of the aesthetic distance of theatre, bounded by modernist aesthetics, enabling the viewer's irrevocable tie-in with the real theatrical action.

### Via Negativa: an examination of theatricality

The discussed examination of theatre's possibilities was named *Via Negativa* following Grotowsky, mainly demarking the ethical dimensions of this particular research project.<sup>2</sup> Grotowsky, striving for reforms, had already attempted to discard everything that was not material to theatre in order to uncover the key specifics thereof. A theatre can get rid of its décor and technical effects, but not the actors and the living bond between the actor and the audience. Grotowsky considers the unique score of human impulses and reactions to be material to theatre, and that it can be evoked through research into the bodily and psychological reactions of actors. For

Grotowsky<sup>3</sup>, *Via negativa* is not a series of skills, but works rather on the principle of reduction, removing obstacles, eliminating organic and psychological blockades in the process of building scenes.<sup>4</sup> It is thus mainly the discoveries of theatre practice that matter: methodological research and scene construction are based on a consistent process of researching the possibilities of an actor's articulation. Grotowsky wanted to establish theatre as a unique institution for researching acting methods (not overlooking the work of Stanislavski, Meyerhold's biomechanics, he researched elements of hatha-yoga, Kathakali dance etc.); he transforms theatre into a laboratory that enables the actor to be spontaneous, sincere, naked.

And now that the viewer is connected with real theatrical action, their focus does not leak away into illusion: the actor's monologue/confession is obviously focused on establishing and gaining conscious insight into live communication with an audience.

A modified way of dealing with theatrical signs and, above all, their reduction in an attempt to reach a real experience, brings certain theatrical endeavors closer to performance art (with its central role of the immediate, common experience of the artist and the audience).

Temporality and singularity denote the kind of analysis of theatrics of so-called post-drama theatre<sup>5</sup>, in which the actor is no longer an interpreter of a role, but rather "the performer, offering their own presence up for contemplation"<sup>6</sup>. This live process, the provocative presence of an individual instead of the enactment of character, is built upon the duality of embodiment and communication and also on the interplay of the oppositions of spontaneity and discipline. New forms of theatre aim to "reactivate audience participation"<sup>7</sup>, to open up the process of theatre, thereby revealing the presence of the viewer in different ways. New connections of the personal and public, intimate and open, are the result of researching how a text and an actor can tune into a relationship with the viewer.

Besides the aforementioned important reference in the method of the construction of *via negativa*, Grotowsky, the relationship to the script also points in the direction of another revolutionary of modern theatre, Artaud. The classical director supposedly allowed the actors speak their own discourse and, above all, the discourse of the author in the form of the script. And this is exactly what was at the center of Artaud's criticism of traditional bourgeois theatre, in which he demanded the exclusion of this duplicating logic and in which post-drama theatre follows him<sup>8</sup> (the utter reduction of the scripted text). Artaud wants to absolve the theatre of a reduction to a single language, the language of words with a logical-discursive intention. He wishes to reach the moment where "repetition is almost impossible"<sup>9</sup>.

Post-drama theatre is crucially, but not exclusively connected with experimentally-minded theatres or those willing to take artistic risks<sup>10</sup>, among which we may count the theatre research *Via negativa*.

### ŠE (MORE): the negativity of desire

Researching one of the seven deadly sins, gluttony, although food implies a consistent research into bodily (taboos).

To Nietzsche, largely responsible for rehabilitating the body in later humanistic thought, sin is not a basic state of humanity, but merely an ethically religious interpretation of physiological indisposition. Foucault, following Nietzsche, thought that the body, poisoned with food or values under the pressure of various regimes like eating habits and moral laws, creates obstacles.

The Old Testament laws on sin were reshaped in the Gospels under the influence of the recognition of some of the psychology of sin. Not so much sin as a single act, but rather mortal sin as a characteristic of humanity<sup>11</sup>. The sinner, under the pressure of internal conflict (unfulfilled needs and desires) resolves their situation with anger, gluttony, greed, sloth, lust, envy or pride. In modern times these so-called deadly sins are recognized under more clinical names: neurosis, dependencies, personal crisis.

Humans are the only beings not entirely determined by natural conditions (e.g. feeding), even though we live in a body of a certain gender, in a certain society etc. (the biological and social structure of an individual). Food, and with it, the maintenance of life are connected with the most intimate core of every human being. Gluttony has always been one of the more socially acceptable sins, with which the sinner replaces unfulfilled (mainly) emotional needs. Similar to anger, the subject of the first research<sup>12</sup>, gluttony is among the most physiological sins (an emotional response to a certain deficit). Today, the self-destructive nature of gluttony is labeled as addiction, an illness opening up numerous discussions on the phenomena of clinical relationships to food such as obesity, bulimia, anorexia, or manic slimming. Food also offers a certain amount of bodily pleasure, often leading to a trauma/deficit of pleasure: dissatisfaction with one's image leads to chronic battles with weight, the imperatives of fashion, and consumerism, strategies of socialization etc.

At least since the Middle Ages, Western societies have used confession as one of their main rituals, later making it one of the most valued techniques for producing truth. The clinical results of confession have led to a unique method of interpretation which, having reordered the normal and the pathologi-



cal, also brought a shift of guilt and sin. Confessing guilt/sin is becoming more and more devoted to the reality of the body in pain/pleasure.

Thus the contemporary post-drama process acts out *on* the body, which is a unique image of agony, as the actors must actually enact themselves<sup>13</sup>. Even though gluttony is a state to which we are mainly led by emotion, this is not the subject of the performance, but rather the effect of staging upon the viewer. Every sin has its own dramaturgy (the mechanisms of an individual's intimate confrontation with sin and defenses from it), and the dramaturgy of this performance is, as has been mentioned, largely in the hands of the viewer. The result is an interactive theatrical piece as a stage for the performative, the processual, and the reciprocal.

In a way, the actors come alive in bodies of the past that they have transformed into a theatre

of forgotten/suppressed scenes, to make the viewers witnesses to a lost childhood (moment of regression). In this sense we see the role of *via negativa* in that it mediates penetration both through rational and irrational processes in order to reach forgotten/suppressed images and scenes. It seems that the authors are mainly concerned with the conscious insight of the viewer's personal contexts and prejudices and with evoking associations.

If we attempt to look at sinful gluttony through the optics of desires according to Lacan, we stumble upon the question of pleasure in relationship to the central lack: in the process of symbolization that is in the beginning of any subjectivization the body is dissected through the signifier, and enjoyment is "evacuated" from it (Žižek). And yet something remains: the isles of pleasure, around which pulsates the Freudian (sexual) drive<sup>14</sup> (partial pulsion<sup>15</sup>). When discussing drives or pulsion, we do not mean the pressure of a

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need such as hunger or thirst, but rather an ever-present force. Pulsion is in a basic relationship with unconscious desires, inscribed in the symbolic (the split subject of discourse). But while desires are supposedly sustained by the inability of satisfaction or the unattainability of the desired object (central lack) in accordance with the pleasure principles, pulsion is always satisfied, regardless of the will and pleasure of the subject (satisfaction may soon take apart the economy of pleasure; besides, according to Lacan, the reality of the body in pleasure/pain is also the border of any discourse): "Whenever you feed the mouth - the one opening in the registry of pulsion - they're not satisfied by food, but by that which we call oral pleasure"<sup>16</sup>.

Even though the so-called oral phase implies "an attitude of wanting to 'devour it all' and thereby satisfy all needs"<sup>17</sup>, the child's turn into the inter-subjective symbolic economy is key: due to its dependency, the satisfaction of its needs is defined by the demand of the Other (primarily mother, later authorities of tradition, convention, law: the act of interdiction). The child eats and "cleans the plate" in order to demonstrate obedience and the ability not to stain itself while eating etc. "In short, we satisfy our needs in order to earn our place in the societal order."<sup>18</sup> (A picturesque rendition of this situation can be found in the caricatured exaggeration in Zorc's piece *Golden Birdy*.)

Returning to desire, according to Lacan, and the meaning it supposedly has for bodily pleasure, we see how it continues to work in a *negative* way. In its search for so-called surplus pleasure it has to remain unfulfilled, which is why it is always followed by the "more", depicted in a twisted form by the relentless "stuffing of mouths". The unfulfilled/prohibited desire is the negative foundation of our lives, bound to the field of reality, upon which the imaginary and symbolic are also built (the negativity of the law of symbolic order: the suspension of pleasure). In a twisted sense, under the constant pressure of drive, we can actually devour food in our search for partial satisfaction (no food will ever satisfy the oral

drive, related to the lacking object), in order to gain, at least, so-called oral pleasure, demarcating the identity of the subject one way or the other in its "sinful" excess. This is because every human being is defined by a double build in which it is both a being of need and a being of desire.

The actors, tied into the creation of the new aesthetic organism of theatre by introducing complicated stories of their most intimate fates, are putting forth the question of the fate of contemporary theatrics. The actor attempts to form a likeable, attractive body by training, taming the disobedient body, subject to a meld of needs, demands and desires. But by staging battles in the cultivation process (also on the feeding level) and the exorcism of pleasure, the actor can demystify the "exaltation" of the theatrical body. Not, however, without actually identifying with the performance, which again is a kind of pleasure.

## Staging desire

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Contemporary strategies of staging the subject through intense use of the body and the forming of new performative models shake the modernist structure of the theatrical. The art subject of modernism laid claim to autonomy and coherence, mainly at the expense of veiling the corporeal and the desires and pleasure connected with it. The radical effect of staging

desires is the very "dramatic potential"<sup>20</sup> that unveils the importance of inter-subjective exchange and process among the actors of contemporary stage arts and other borderline performance practices. Contemporary theatre practitioners show an increasing interest in staging particularized artist's subjectivities, mainly through multilayered unveilings of the bodily, enabling the tearing down of aesthetic distances and an intensive experience of the fluidity and proximity of actors and audiences. Staging desires questions the status of the theatrical: the theatrical body besides pointing at the complexity of its own mediation, demands that contemporary stage practices are read within the context of such stagings. It is these moves in understanding subjectivity that are tearing down the established understanding of theatrical representation. And the contemporary melding of theatre and performance arts may thus be understood within new articulations of subjectivity, within the need to stage desire "that, despite the seeming failure of pleasure, is only now producing pleasure.../and/ transferring it to us, the viewers."<sup>21</sup>

It is finally this new type of performativity that defines the discovery of new possibilities of researching the meeting points between art and life.<sup>22</sup>

The strategies of overstepping conventions and obstacles, a confrontation that may well be therapeutic, are key in marking the trait of building new theatrics. The use of sinful glutony as one of the key theme origins in the process of building the *via negativa* method, wherein eliminating the surplus becomes a way of reaching for the unknown.

Translated by Jure Novak.

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Cf. D. Laporte, "There's no beautiful smell. The beautiful does not smell.", in: *Zgodovina dreka*, Koda, Ljubljana 2004, pp. 95-100.  
<sup>2</sup> Cf. interview w/ B. Jablanovec at [http://www.vntheatre.com/articles\\_si.html](http://www.vntheatre.com/articles_si.html)  
<sup>3</sup> After J. Grotowski, *Ka siromašnom pozorištu*, ICS, Beograd 1976, p. 6.  
<sup>4</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 16.  
<sup>5</sup> Cf. H.-T. Lehmann, *Postdramsko gledališče*, Maska, Ljubljana 2003.  
<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 162.  
<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 234.  
<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 42.  
<sup>9</sup> J. Derrida, "Gledališče krutosti in zapora predstave",

in: *Prisotnost, predstavljanje, teatralnost*, Maska, Ljubljana 1996, p. 90.

<sup>10</sup> H.-T. Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. A. Ihan, "Sedem smrtnih grehov", in: *Deset božjih zapovedi*, Koda, Ljubljana 2000, p. 214.

<sup>12</sup> B. Jablanovec et al., *Via negativa: Jeza*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> H.-T. Lehmann, p. 245.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. S. Freud, "Nagoni in njihove usode", in: *Metapsihološki spisi*, SH, Ljubljana 1987, pp. 71-100.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. J. Lacan, "Transfer in pulzija", v: *Štirje temeljni koncepti psihoanalize*, Analecta, Ljubljana 1996, pp. 113-184.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>17</sup> S. Žižek, "Cogito and the sexual difference" in: *Jacques Lacan. Critical Evaluation in Cultural Theory*

(ed. by S. Žižek), Volume II, Routledge, NY and London, 2003, p. 144;

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, (slo: p. 290).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. P. Jesenko, "Lucidna norost s stališčem", at: [http://www.vntheatre.com/articles\\_si.html](http://www.vntheatre.com/articles_si.html)

<sup>20</sup> Cf. B. Kunst, "Radikalni dramski učinki subjektivnosti: Amelia Jones in strategije interpretacije telesa", in: A. Jones, *Božji Art: uprizorjanje subjekta*, Maska/Študentska založba, Ljubljana 2002, pp. 401-420.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 420.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. M. Gržinič, "Novi performativnosti in procesualnosti nasproti", in: *Maska*, št. 80-81, Ljubljana 2003, pp. 72-75.