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THE EXTENDED FRAMING STATEMENT

SODA M.A. THESIS

*Note for reader:*

*This paper originally contained three parts. I have included here only part 1, which I take to be most relevant reading for someone interested in my thoughts on art making.*

PART 1

WHAT THIS PERFORMING WORK IS

Across the past two years, I have made a number of performance works, that relate to a large and complex assembly of themes and concerns. The pieces included two public presentations at HZT, the thesis piece *Actors of production*, as well as *Production desired value added*, framed as research presentation, and a series of four pieces produced by Höyhentämö – Pluckhouse in Helsinki, called, in chronological order, *Aistiofysiikka* (Esthesiophysics), *Territoriot* (Territories), *Potentia*, and *Adsorbsio*. Additionally, a number of class room showings have served as a space for experimentation.

In these works, often together with my collaborators, I approached the physicality of experience, and claim that this physicality feeds into meaning production. Significant portion of the work has dealt with training, and how training is constructing experience and institutionalising meaning. I have attempted to explore how this institutionalisation is a part of political identities. Furthermore, I have attempted to ask what is value and how that relates to work and institution of social and economic production. Finally, this has lead to an attempt at studying the particular concepts of capitalism, and what capitalism is in relation to capabilities of trained bodies. All of this is a lot, in many ways too much. The overwhelming span of the subjects to be approached is at the core of the work. It is, specifically, about trying to approach and address the too-much, the span that is not possible to 'master' or to gain an intellectual control over. It is, nevertheless, an attempt at reflection on the 'impossible' range of issues.

Another defining feature of the work is its particular way of combining physicality and philosophical reflection: It can be described as a dialogue between a physical practice and a form of conceptual practice. This is not to suggest an essential ontological difference between 'ideas' and bodies. It is just to acknowledge that a part of the work concerns physical performing, that is movements and actions of human bodies in space, and another part is theoretical, progressing by the way of discourse in reading, writing and speaking. The meanings that are relevant in the work are formed in the process of these two modes of operation affecting each other.

I sometimes call the work experimental philosophy. This raises several points: firstly, the work is related to the contemporary conceptions of performance-making, that regard dance and philosophy as comparable

strategies of meaning-production. Secondly, the work, nevertheless, does not conform to academic requirements of research. Thirdly, to call it experimental instead of just calling it philosophy, implies that what the physically-engaged, performing, dancing bodies produce is not precisely the same as what discourse alone produces. This last point, perhaps, justifies the work as something that has a particular value. Engaging in such performance-making practice, and participating in it as a spectator, can lead to observations and understanding of the world in a way that can be achieved by neither philosophy or dance alone.

This work can also relatively conveniently be called dance, and that is the context in which it has mostly been placed. However, I think the work belongs to an area of contemporary art making where the distinctions between the different stage arts have become somewhat irrelevant and uninteresting. Related to this, I will in many instances below call this work performing or performance making. This is in no way to imply that it should not be thought of as dance.

What I attempt to deal with is a complexity and interconnectedness of things. The work is sweeping through huge themes, concerns and concepts, and it may at times seem megalomaniac or 'too general'. Nevertheless, I feel an urgency to do this; I feel that, in order to understand the world, I need to dive through it. The work is this dive through the abundance of interconnected things, a dash-through in order to reach for something experientially graspable. It is based on a conviction that everything works simultaneously at the plane of sensation and feeling, and at the plane of political and economic institutions. That there is an urgency to address this complexity at its extension to faculties of the body, to social conventions, to institutions, to political aesthetics, to abstracted discourse. It is not about being proudly inaccurate or ignorant. It is to incorporate as much accuracy as is possible without being imprisoned in the academic abstraction or by a paradigm we need to follow. The claim is that the complexity calls for this dive, and its purpose is to feel and to perceive, and in this way to arrive at a form of understanding. I claim that this understanding is crucial if we are to grasp our own participation in things like national identities or capitalist economy. Because these multifaceted aspects of society and our conditions of living are not just about narrowly-definable research areas, I think, in addition to more specific approaches, there is also space for an endeavour that goes beyond of what is a 'proper' research subject.

Physicality is not 'true' or 'false'. This is the indisputable aspect of performance. The question of relevance of performance for reflection of society concerns how experiments made within the context of artistic performance are located within the whole variety of what bodies do in society, by and large. It seems to be necessary to assume that what bodies do on stage is a part of their function in society – otherwise we would be assuming a detached existence for art outside of society. Yet, even accepting that artistic performance is a part of society, doubts could be raised concerning if performance making has the ability to make observations concerning any societal subject the artists choose to be interested in. The doubt is perhaps connected to the freedom that art making entails: the artists, arguably, could have chosen to do so many different things. So why should we believe that what we witness a group of trained bodies do on stage, is a function of what a great number of bodies are doing in many other occasions of social life? Are the necessities and contingencies that apply to performing the same as those that apply in other social conditions?

The question takes this particular form also partly when it is accepted that the performing work is not about imitating and representing things observed elsewhere, and consequently cannot be evaluated against whether that representation is 'accurate' or if it is 'realistic'. I propose to view my performance making, among many other contemporary stage works, as an experiment with performing bodies. It invites the spectator, and the performers themselves as well, to witness the experiment take place. So how, then, do we judge if the ways in which the artists composed their experiment is 'valid' as meaning-production?

A performance is inarguably producing some meanings. Its ability to address more or less specified social and political subjects or themes must be based on the makers' and spectators' sharing of some of the experience of living in that society. The audience has an understanding of the bodies they witness, of their living in the society that the performers and the spectators share. (Presumably they do share some of their social reality.) The relevance of an art work for particular political concern is always ambivalent. The general tendency of audiences and critics is to doubt the power of the performance the more, the less the subject is thought to be personal to the presenting artists. If I were to address the issues of 'my own life', I will be granted the 'right' to present what I feel needs to be presented. If I claim to address a political topic and experiment with something that presumably concerns the way in which large numbers of people participate in or engage with that subject, I am met with much more scepticism towards the value of the work.

I do not wish to deny the subjective character of my artistic work. What I choose to do is filtered through my experience, which necessarily is a product of my specific history of conditions, as well as my specific interests. I can only believe, that what my body derives out of that experience, is not so alien to how other bodies must exist in society. I do my best to learn about society what I can, yet I do have to act out of my state of being unable to know everything that might have been relevant to know. To me, art is not science, but it could be politics.

A performance is a physical event in which concrete things happen. It is not entirely a matter of 'interpretation' how an artistic performance relates to the world, since what those concrete events and actions are, is also on some level objectively observable. Thinking of *Actors of production*, in particular, we could list, for example, following 'facts': in the piece *Actors of production* a body makes physical effort to draw a graph about the history of the market value of the largest European business companies; the performance presents some ways to evaluate and attach values to some of the activities that the three performing bodies are capable of; language-based claims on the abilities of those performing bodies, as well as numerical data concerning some economic topics, are presented in the piece, and the way in which they are presented requires noticeable physical effort from the performing bodies; and, the performing bodies have been trained in movement and dance, in reading and writing, and in collection and organising of data, and those abilities are used in the piece. But whether all of that has something relevant to say about connections between physicality of experience and production of value is, of course, a matter for dispute.

A large part of what was said above about physicality and performing work, applies also to the theorising and philosophising that is part of my artistic work. That philosophising happens in a mode of performing. Some of the, lets say fragments of discourse, the work produces are just for the process, while others may end up being performed to the public. Yet others have ended up in this piece of writing. (Part 2 of this paper is a

written performance of a kind.) This abstract reflection I am presenting, often alongside the reflections of my co-performers, is there as a kind of performed event. The presented, more or less philosophical reflections are results of the very same experiential and experimental process that the whole artistic work is a result of. The words are influenced by reading of philosophy, and they are also influenced by devising physical stage action and executing it. They are influenced by a reflective experience of living in a society. What is said is not validated by an academic paradigm, because we did not follow such a paradigm. Yet, I do believe there is some value in saying those words, and receiving them as an event. I think the event of the performance, with those words and with all the other physical things that take place, will decide what their meaning is.