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Field: Theater and Performing Arts

Representations of the "intimate" in performance art
The spaces of interiority, limits of the encounter with alterity

PhD Thesis Summary

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The argument, the premise and the objectives of the study:

The research presents a complex analysis of the performative/theatrical practices in which the performing artists try to establish an intimate relationship with the *other* – with a spectator or, in rarer cases, with a non-human *alter.*

The study's fundamental focus is the theorization of the "intimate" experience in *performance art* on the background of the well-known drift in postmodernity of some humanistic values such as *subjectivity*, *identity*, *authenticity,* and *presence*. It is commonplace that postmodernism questions an essentialist perspective of relating to these fundamental conceptual pillars for understanding the encounter with *the other* in artistic practices. The theoretization *of* the "intimate" in performance art is in correlation with a theoretical reflection on these key concepts for understanding the "transformative experience" of the encounter between the artist-performer and audience. Therefore, if these notions are understood through their heterogeneity and dissolution, the conceptual framework of the "intimate" can no longer be comprehended from an essentialist, idealist perspective.

The polemical discourse that I propose questions a teleology and an ontology of this affective process connected with authenticity, immediacy and the "live" presence of the

performer, but also with other immutable coordinates that would constitute the *nature* of this psycho-affective complex. In contrast, I demonstrate the complementarity within the structure of a performance of the apparent opposites that the relationship with another entails: theatricality–authenticity, presence *in corpore*–mediated presence, physical proximity –emotional distance, aesthetic immersion –aesthetic distancing, one-to-one encounter–collective participation, authentic self-disclosure–fictionalized disclosure, biographical self–performed self, self-reflexivity intersubjectivity, private self - public self, etc.

The premise around which the present study is built is that the fundamental aspects of an intimate relationship in performance art must be seen in congruence with *theatricality* and alongside structures of physical, psycho-affective, but also aesthetic, phenomenological and ontological *distance* in interaction with the *other.*

During this approach to *relating to another under the influence of theatricality*, I refer to two contexts through which we can correlate *theatricality* with the so-called "intimate" performance. First, I take into account the theatricality of the *performative event* that works, often according to the practices of dramatic representation: strategies of documentation, repetition, and rehearsal of the (partially) fictionalized reality. Second, I refer to the theatricality of the performer who acts through practices of narrativization of the self, of representing and embodying (even) his multiple *personas*, his internalized selves that he later brings into the present. In this situation, performing the self is attached to the fictionalization of life – which is necessary for the performer to enter a dialogical state, in a possible emotional closeness to the public*.*

Regarding a discussion on the mechanisms of *distancing,* theorists, and practitioners – especially those who work in "one-to-one" performance – understand the territory of the "intimate" in opposition to aesthetic distancing and in opposition to a physical, psychological, affective distance that may occur between the performer and the participant. By contrast, the present study highlights how the structures of physical, psycho-affective, but also aesthetic, dramaturgical distancing can offer emotional proximity in the intersubjective space between the performer and the spectator.

From one typology of performative experience to another, I have demonstrated how physical proximity cannot ensure an immediate deep emotional closeness in the spectatorial dialogue. A relevant example is that in the "one-to-one" performance, the

relation with *another* can be one of dominance, due to the (abusive) overcoming of the limits of proximity between the performer and the public.

In this research on *openness to alterity,* in autobiographical works, I discuss the *distance* that the performer takes from an alter-ego in his interiority, to narrate himself and to (empathically) represent the *other* in the audience. In the final chapter, focused on the analysis of the eco-performance, I approach distancing from the perspective of the phenomenology of encounter between two different alterities: that of the human subject and that of the *non-human other-from another species.*

The objectives of the study:

As for the objectives of the present study, they are in correlation with the research questions that shaped each individual chapter. At the beginning of the analysis, the objective was to answer the following question: "To what extent would a theatrical event built according to the norms of classical theatricality offer a 'less intimate' theatrical experience, unlike a performance, in which the physical proximity between the performer and participant would also determine an affective closeness?" The question was framed in the following context: researchers of "one-to-one" performance interactions relate to this typology of performance as facilitating an "exigency" of intimacy, of shared personal emotions, in contrast to the (supposed) distant and impersonal character of the relationship between the stage and the public in classical theatricality.

Then, in the second chapter, I pursued two questions that offered a new perspective for understanding the relationship with *the other* in the "one-to-one" performance. First, I ask: "How is the experience of the "intimate" performed outside of the association of this concept with the affective principles of the *in corpore* presence, the co-presence (in a *here-and-now*), and authenticity?" Another question I pursued is: "How do the artists of a "one-to-one" dialogue perform the personal encounter for *one spectator*, given that the "one-to-one" interaction also involves receptivity in front of a collective audience?"

In the third part of the research, the fundamental objective was to question the experience of the performer of connecting with his (inner) other or with the *otherness* of the spectator in autobiographical works. How does this experience of

(inter)subjectivity take shape (seen as a relational space of truthfulness, authenticity, and self-transparency), given that the *identity* of the performer is fictionalized, and the emotional *vulnerability* is expressed in front of the audience through dramaturgical structures of interpretation and simulation of an "authentic" confession?

In the fourth chapter, in which I have discussed the Romanian performative context in the '70s-'80s and in the post-revolutionary years, the objective was to argue that, precisely because of the isolationism (personal, artistic, institutional) in which these artists were active, their performances took form through an *openness to the otherness* (of a spectator-observer or a collective otherness).

Therefore, these were the questions that guided this chapter: "How does the interaction with the *other* develop, in contrast to the association of the "intimate" sphere as dependent on the private space, in which the Eastern artist would perform in a solitary self-referentiality?"; "What are the performative strategies that the artists use, so that that supposed bodily (and identity) self-censorship also implies an *addressability* towards another?

At the end of this argumentation, in which I have discussed the connection (physical, affective, ontological, performative) with the natural environment in eco-performance practices, I have considered two issues: "How can the ecofeminist performance be interpreted outside of an intimate encounter seen as holism, in which the corporeality and identity of the performer are put in consubstantial connection with Nature?" and "How does an ecological connection with the *other-of-another-species* emerge through distant proximity (on a psycho-physical, cognitive, ontological, performative level) in the works in which non-human agents perform themselves? "

Research methodology:

The work *Representations of the "intimate" in performance art. The spaces of interiority, limits of the encounter with alterity* is an interdisciplinary analysis in which I have called on perspectives on the relationship with the *other* derived from several fields of study. I have considered theories that came from the philosophy of the Other such as those of Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber, or Jean Luc-Nancy.

In the chapter on the analysis of autobiographical performance, I have resorted to theories on communication with the other, which came from psychological studies, such as the Johari model of understanding the confessional self. Regarding the methodology of this study, I have opted for multiple methods of interpretation, which I have used depending on the typology of the performances discussed. In this analysis, I have used interpretative tools that come from theatrical aesthetics and poetics and fundamental perspectives of Performance Studies.

In the second chapter of the research, in which I discuss the "one-to-one" encounter, I use Levinasian phenomenology to understand the face-to-face relationship between the performer and the alterity of the spectator. In the final chapter, in which I discuss the co-presence between human subjectivity and corporeality, and the presence of the non-human, I use ecocriticism and object-oriented-ontology theories as interpretative paradigms.

Synthesis of the main ideas from the research chapters:

The first part of the study addressed the question of whether a theatrical work created according to the aesthetics and structure of classical theater would really involve an aesthetic and psycho-physical distancing of the spectator – as opposed to a performance art piece, based on physical proximity and emotional closeness to the participant.

The objective was to demonstrate that, both in the case of classical theatrical representations, and in the case of actions under the immediacy of *performativity*, the practitioners use in the dialogue with the public, both mechanisms of physical and psycho-affective *distance* and *immersion*, of corporal-psychical participation of the

spectator – seen as the coauthor. This argument stands in opposition to the perspective of "one-to-one"performance theorists like Rachel Zerihan and Rachel Gomme. These scholars of "one-to-one" performance refer to performance art as an *exclusive* artistic practice that would *guarantee* intense affective experience and immersion of the spectator, who has become a co-participant, a performing-spectator.

At the same time, in this part of the argumentation I have analyzed a diachronic evolution of the stage – from the *proscenium* to the *black box* and to other more experimental stage architectures. I have discussed the characteristics of these spaces, according to which the spectator might be open to emotional participation in the relational dynamics proposed to him. By contrast, he can position himself at a distance, he can reject a collaboration and co-participation, a *fictional* or *performative pact* – necessary for the reception experience and spectatorial dialogue to exist.

One of the implications of the analysis is that there is no imperative correlation between a stage space and the degree of intimacy, of subjectivization of the relationship with the audience.What articulates a theatrical experience as being in a sphere of the "intimate" is, first and foremost, the emotional feedback loop it can offer, based on the process *of self-disclosure* and *fictionalized disclosure.* In this part of the study, I have also discussed the dynamics of relationship in different theatrical practices (starting with August Strindberg's domestic drama), based on the complementarity between what I called the reception of a *narrative intimacy* and a *performative intimacy.*

In the chapter *Being-in-common in "one-to-one" performance. Between the singular dialogism and the experience of community,* I have taken a polemical approach to how the "intimate" is theorized in the relationship between one performer and one participant.

One-to-one performance researchers (Rachel Gomme, Rachel Zerihan) discuss the relationship as being based on the following dramaturgical, ethical and affective principles: *a.* the live, *in corpore*, presence of the performer and b. the co-presence seen as the participation of the performer and of the spectator in the "performative now" of the stage, but also as an engagement between the two in affective reciprocity. In addition, the authenticity of the artist and the authenticity of the event he creates (seen as a unique and ephemeral encounter) are also associated by theorists in the field with an intimate experience in a "one-to-one" connection.

In contrast to the perspectives of these researchers, but also to the way practitioners of the "one-to-one" relate to their art, I argued that an intense intimate dialogue is *not* fully realized precisely because of the discontinuities of the presence, co-presence and, authenticity, which may occur between the performer and the participant. Although these performances are presented as places of *hospitality*, (of an active openness towards the *other,* the spectator) – in fact, the performer is the one who is in control of the so-called "therapeutic" context that he created. The performer manipulates the (spatial, temporal) co-presence in the name *of immediacy*, spontaneity and, *live presence*, in the name of *urgency* to *accomplish* emotional closeness.

These coordinates then influence the emotional co-presence between the performing artist and the participant. I have discussed the affective co-presence under two possibilities of interaction with *the other–the spectator.* First, I have taken into consideration the co-presence, understood as a symmetrical emotional communication between the performer and the performing-spectator. In contrast to this reciprocal communication, in works such as the performance of Adrian Howells's *Footwashing for the Sole* (2010), a one-sided *co-presence,* based on a dominant relationship appears.

I have questioned the understanding of the intimate connection in the "one-to-one" performance based on the authenticity of the performative event, understood as a singular, unique, unrepeatable encounter. I refer to that ontological understanding of *performance art* determined by a thesism of the present moment ("performative now") and by the authenticity dependent on this shared present, as theorized by Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993).

Then, regarding the authentic *experience* that the "one-to-one" artists assume, linked to the *exposure o*f their identities in front of another, it can be classified as an *intersubjective authenticity* and a *self-referential authenticity. Intersubjective authenticity* means an affirmative openness to the other's presence. I have discussed *self-referential authenticity* as an interaction with *the other* in which the performer *protects* their identity and vulnerability from disclosure in front of the participant.

Through this self-oriented authenticity, seen as an egocentric experience, the performer creates a relational space just to expose their own *persona,* their own auratic presence. The performer does not create a topos oriented towards others, a topos of hospitality, care, *responsibility (*Emmanuel Levinas), and *reciprocity* (Martin Buber). From Marina Abramović's *face-to-face* encounter with the other in *The artist is present,*

analyzed according to the Levinasian approach on *the face,* to the massage-therapeutic encounters created by Adrian Howells or Mădălina Dan, the participant–coauthor in a "one-to-one" appears as the *anonymous other.* The spectator is either not recognized in one's own identity, or is objectified, placed in invisibility (at the emotional level).

The theoretical discourse has taken into consideration the relationship with *the other* in "one-to-one" performative actions in a limited way. Researchers like Rachel Gomme, Rachel Zerihan or, Dominic Johnston saw these relational contexts as *particularized* encounters for *a single* spectator. The emotional exchange was seen as an intersubjectivity created *exclusively* between two presences: that of the performer and that of the participant-coauthor.

In contrast to this perspective, which sees "one-to-one" performance as an *exclusively* dialogic interaction between two participants, I have proposed an analysis from the perspective of a *trialogical model* of communication with the other. The "one-to-one" performance does not only involve that *singular* interaction with a spectator-participant but also the participation (at a distance) of a *third spectator-witness* or a community of participants to whom the artistic act was not intentionally addressed.

Therefore, I have introduced a new typology of these performances, that of "collective one-to-one " into the theoretical conversation on "one-to-one" performance. The fact that the "one-to-one"performance also involves a plural reception of several participants has at least one important implication. In these relationship contexts appears an objective view of the (absent) participants who, (even if they are not the coauthors of the emotional exchange of a" one-to-one) can "evaluate" through a critical perspective/from an ethical position: to what extent were that *presence* and *authenticity* proposed by the performer fulfilled? The third excluded witness, distant from *the here-and-now* of a "one-to-one" or a participant who unexpectedly appears at the performance, can also question, on an aesthetic, dramaturgical, and performative level the approach that "commitment of the intimate" was built and assumed by the one-to-one performance-artists.

In the third chapter, I analyzed how the encounter with *the other* is interpreted in the autobiographical, confessional solo performance. The discussion addressed the following fundamental notions for understanding the theatrical aspect of the relationship with another in confessional performances: the multiple *identities* of the

performer, *the authenticity* and *vulnerability* that the solo performer uses to disclose himself in front of the audience.

Regarding *identity,* I have discussed how, in these creations, a possible emotional connection with the audience is not built on the expression of a unitary identity of the performer. Instead, the performer exposes in the performative present his plural self, hybridized between the self who lived the experience and the self who narrates it.

In the process of self-narration, the multiple identities of the performer are divided between the biographical self, the narrated self and the narrating self. For example, in performative actions like *Parallel,* (directed by Ferenc Sinkó and Leta Popescu) or *Gray's Anatomy,* by Spalding Gray, the performer's multiple selves are fictionalized and they defictionalize to later reflect the multilayered, (partially) theatricalized self of each individual spectator.

In the personal performances of the first person, emotional proximity between the performer and the participant is possible *exclusively* through a recognition of the multiple identities of both of the performer and the participant. The only "ontological characteristic" of the "intimate" in the autobiographical performance is the *transitory process* of the encounter between the semi-real, semi-fictional identity layers of the actor-performer and the participant-witness of the confession.

My theoretical perspective emphasized the idea that the dialogic dimension par excellence of the performer's self functions simultaneously with an orientation towards their *inner alterity*[1]. Therefore, I have discussed the autobiographical performances around a new concept I have introduced, that of the *double intersubjectivity* which the performer experiences: as self-intimacy, with a theatricalized inner self, but also as orientation towards other and representation of the spectator.

The fact that the solo performer is confronted with a multiplicity of their selves causes their supposed authentic expression to be distorted by the interconnection of these fractured selves that oscillate between retrospection, introspection, and the living present, the *hic et nunc*.

The self of the performer, in the process of retrospection and self-fictionalization, operates with different *conventions* of truthfulness and authenticity. For example,

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[1]   For the concept of *inner alterity*, in the context of the confession of the solo-performer from the autobiographical performance, see Laura Pavel, *Personaje ale teoriei, ființe ale ficțiunii (Theory Characters, Fictional Beings)*, Iași, Institutul European (European Institute), 2021, p.144.

performers confess and maintain nominal identity between the biographical self and the narrating self, or they overdisclose details of their private lives to make the confession veridical. However, behind *the effects of truthfulness* that the autobiographical actors use (unlike the one-to-one performers) – they do not create an expectation of authenticity understood as an experience that would guarantee an emotional depth with the audience, in the name of a "real" confession.

Then, regarding the authenticity of the performance understood as a unique encounter, shared in an unrepeatable *here-and-now,* is not realized in the autobiographical performative stories. In the case when the self-narration in the "per formative now" implies dramaturgical tools of reenactment, rehearsal, and presentification of the performer's personal history, the solo-performer uses structures of repetition and anticipation that deconstruct the authenticity of the performance event , correlated with the immediacy of the present moment.

In contrast to the perspective that relates to *vulnerability* in *performance art* in the absence of theatricality of the self and by association with an authentic presence, I have demonstrated how the vulnerable subjectivities of the autobiographical, need an imperative of fictionalization and theatricality (biographical, private, but also scenic) to enter a dialogic state and to represent the history of *the other .*To represent their own traumatic identity and to reflect the fragile self of the spectator, the performers interpret and reproduce affects and emotional experiences that they can *only* expose under this protection of the fictional selves they embody.

Towards the end of the chapter, I have discussed the mechanisms of self-staging emphasizing the identity fluctuations of the performers in the auto-narration process: between the biographical life and the one performed through autofiction. In the per formative self-narratives constructed by Mihai Mihalcea (with his fictionalized double, Farid Fairuz) and Spalding Gary, the classic autobiographical pact – theorized by Phillipe Lejeune – is replaced by an autofictional performativity.

Therefore, relating to *the other* is no longer based on authenticity connected to the narration of the biographical truth and the exposure of a unitary self of the artist-performer-character. As a result, following the deconstruction of the illusion of the performer's unitary self and the truthful authenticity that would appear in the process of self-confession, respectively of a vulnerability depending on self-fictionalization, I have demonstrated that identity, authenticity, and vulnerability are no longer

essentialist coordinates that guarantee emotional depth in the dialogue between the solo-performer and the audience.

The chapter *The Relational East. Politics and poetics of the encounter in the Romanian performative experiments ('70s-'80s). Perspectives of intersubjectivity after the 1990s* explain the dialogic dimension of the actions during socialism, starting from the *corporeality* of the performer and *the private space,* understood as a (semi)open space for the co-participation of a viewer. I have analyzed performances by Romanian artists from a polemical perspective that complements the local theoretical studies which discuss the actions from the communist era based on isolated performativity of self-reflexive gestures, of the self-censored identity of the artists.

Moreover, the analysis was constructed in contrast with the Western reception of the performative actions from socialist Romania, which relate to Romanian artists through self-victimizing corporeality and identity, dependent on a (physical, emotional) solitary space.

Starting from Nicolas Bourriaud 's theory regarding *relational art,* I have extended his model for conceptualizing intersubjectivity in practices where the *addressability towards another, "the state of encounter"*" (as Bourriaud calls it) becomes the actual *content* of the artistic work. I have suggested a new perspective of interpreting the Romanian actions, seen through the openness to the *(included) otherness of the spectator,* located at a distance – since these actions were documented in front of the camera, (for a spectator *in absentia*)*.*

The need to be seen by the distant spectator, which the artists of the '70s and '80s express in the self-documentations of their corporeality, creates a theatricalization of their private subjectivity. Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu, or Amalia Perjovschi address an absent spectator and public, which is integrated into their works. In the logic of *performing* for the camera-witness of their actions, they look straight into the camera, aestheticize their bodies, and *interpret* themselves as artists in search and expectation of interaction with the external reality.

In this case, one of the most important implications of the analysis is that of overcoming the association of the private space with a topos of *self-reflexivity*, respectively of the public space with a topos of *intersubjectivity*. Their domestic

happenings take place in the liminality of a "secondary public sphere" [2] in which the space and the body *oriented towards the other* of the artists confront the stereotyping of the Eastern artist as an isolated and marginal subjectivity.

The end of the fourth chapter focuses on how that "relationship in suspension", waiting for a spectator (*in absentia*) that the artists of the '70s and '80s experienced, ends up evolving in the post-revolutionary years towards forms of performativity in which the audience, the public space, and the institutional space are accessed more directly by the artists.

In the last chapter, *Postanthropocentrism, intimacy as "strangeness" in ecological performance* I have analyzed the interconnection between the human performer and the alterities from other species with which they interact. One of the fundamental questions of this chapter was: "How does the ethics of relating to the other change when intersubjectivity involves the encounter between a human subject and a *vegetal other*?" I have interpreted eco-performances created in the "natural" environment, following two lines of thought, of positioning in connection to nature: ecofeminism and ecocriticism.

Based on Timothy Morton's ecocritical thinking, I have demonstrated the limitations of a strict ecofeminist interpretation of performances from the '70s and '80s. Performances such as Ana Mendieta's *Silueta Series* (1973-1978) or Jill Orr's *Bleeding Trees,* in which the bodies of the artists is in contact with the natural environment, are actions in which the connection with nature can no longer be understood only by association with the physical proximity and emotional attachment of the performer.

I have demonstrated how both in Ana Mendieta and Jill Orr's performances we observe a *distant proximity* with a *vegetal-other,* which does not correspond to an anthropocentric female emotionality in consubstantiality with the "natural". In these ecofeminist actions, the practitioners use the techniques of performing by (physical, affective, spatial-temporal) distancing.

Following Timothy Morton's theories on the global-local-molecular coexistence of interspecies, I have discussed the ecological performance based on the notion of "intimacy as strangeness". The concept of "intimacy as strangeness" is useful for the creation of an ecological type of performance that would, indeed, position itself

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[2] For "secondary public sphere" see Cristian Nae in Cseh, Katalin, Adam Czirak, *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-based Art in Late Socialist Europe*, Oxon, Routledge, 2018, p. 78.

empathetically towards the *other-of-another-species*, through a transition from anthropocentric egocentrism to altruism and ecocentrism.

Along the lines of Emmanuel Levinas's thinking, of the respectful presence towards *exteriority* that the French philosopher proposes, for Timothy Morton, *hospitality* towards other forms of life means accepting their heterogeneity, which we cannot fully comprehend (cognitively). The relation through *strangeness* with *exteriority* is manifested through an ecological interconnection with the non-human other, placed in a continuous withdrawal from the posture of being included in some anthropocentric "project".

At the end of this study, I have suggested that in recent performances, the artists who are working with the living "natural" (plants, organisms from nature) reach a self-centered subjectification of the connection with a *vegetal-alter*, although they advocate a non-anthropocentric performative language.

In works such as *ECOpoesis of my body* by Alina Tofan or *Sensing the living:promoting the perception of plants,* by Alexandra Pirici, I have observed how the anthropocentric hierarchies (between human and non-human) end up being preserved due to the aestheticization and disengaged contemplation of the natural by the anthropocentric presence of the performer.

The research ends with a co-existentialist approach that analyzes *positioning-at-a-distance* (especially cognitive, ontological) concerning the *other-of-another-species,* given that human subjectivity becomes "weakened" in the works in which non-human agents perform. In works such as Pierre Huyghe's *Zoodram 5* or Marina Oprea's *Me, myself and mycelium*, the relation due to the hyper-proximity between the forms of life determines a radical interspecies exposure. Non-human beings, alongside human agents, coexist in mutual vulnerability. Thus, the human experiences a "deficit of subjectivity", due to the fact that each entity is continuously exposed (invaded or protected) by a multitude of other (micro)entities.

In the end, the main theoretical aspect stated in the last chapter is that eco-art practitioners (from Romania, but also from around the world) should "put to work" this conceptualization of „intimacy as strangeness". Embracing the *distant proximity* in connection to a *non-human other* implies the practitioners' acceptance of the fact that their sensibility cannot anticipate and manipulate (aesthetically, performatively,

ontologically) the presence of a non-human other – which some of them try to *include* in their artistic actions.

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