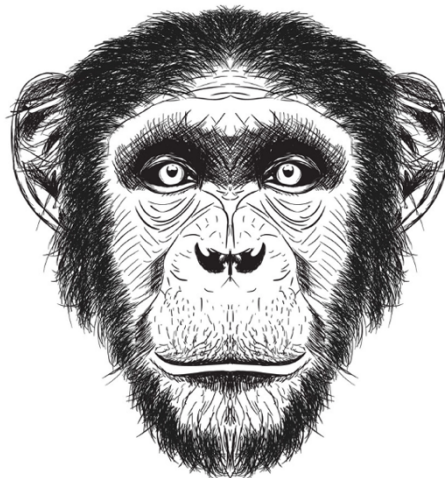


REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Body in Performance

Maya Nitzan

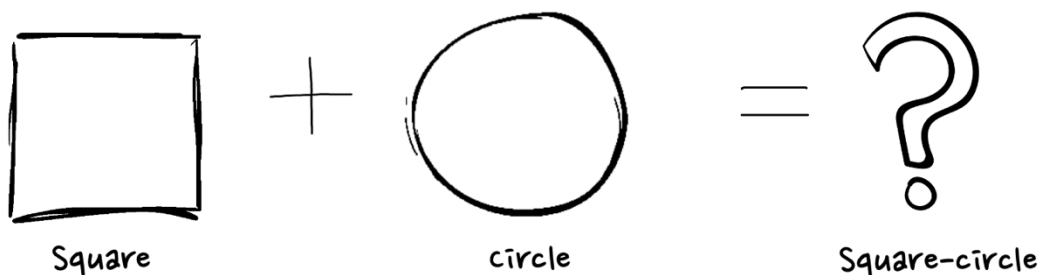
This is a monkey



This is NOT a phatic act!



In my reflective journal, I am interested in delving into a dilemma that I am currently facing regarding my practice and which continued to linger in my mind during the Body in Performance module. This dilemma concerns fundamental questions on why I make art and how I should make it accordingly. I hope that examining these questions while reflecting on the BiP module will help me develop my practice from a clearer perspective.



Following the pandemic crisis in Israel and the economic struggle of art institutions having been paralyzed for months, I came across a heated debate on Facebook regarding the place of art in society:

The discussion thread began with a post criticizing Israeli artists who had protested the government's decision to suspend business activity at art institutions while other industries continued to operate. Many agreed that running only 'essential' activities while trying to eradicate an epidemic seemed prudent, but they took issue with the post's implicit statement that art was dispensable. Some saw art as an influential agent that can change social reality. Others argued that art does nothing but respond and, at most, allow space for contemplation. During the conversation, it became apparent that, without sufficient subsidies from the state, the survival of art institutions will depend on public

support, leading one person to ask, 'How can we make art more important?'

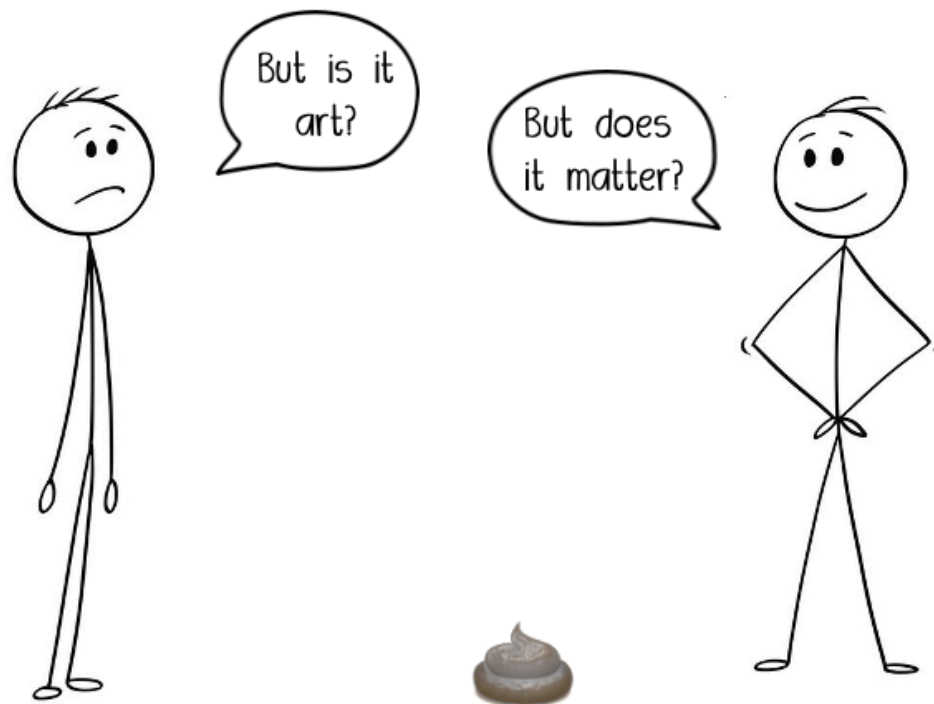
This question did not receive any response, but it stayed with me.

RESISTANT TO COMMODIFICATION



How do I make my art more important? What does “important” even mean??

I do not know if it is utterly foolish to dwell on this question, but so be it.

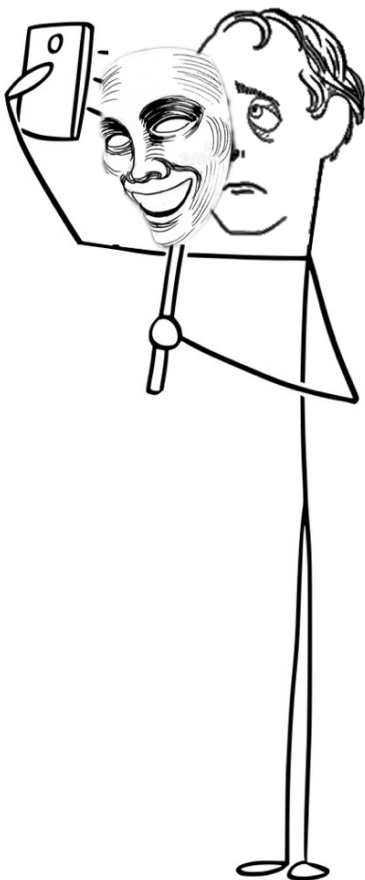


I assume that something important contains a certain meaning that can have some positive effect on one's life.

With art being a voluntary act, it begins with personal meaning: an answer to your loneliness or your fears, an obsessive attempt to understand the world. There's nothing wrong with that; it's motivation powerful enough to generate action. However, when you give your voice a public expression, you claim a space to express yourself and for someone to listen, asking others to make time for you because you think it's important. Therefore, there must be

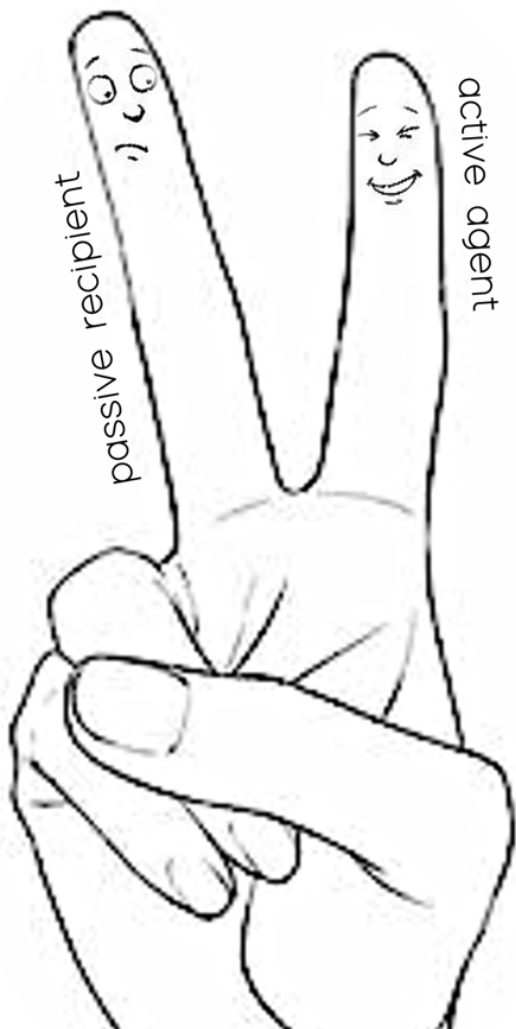
BECOMING AN IMAGE

something else that justifies your doing, and it must have a meaning beyond yourself. I want to create theater that potentially has social impact, but I wonder if it is, perhaps paradoxically, more egocentric and narcissistic to believe I know what is important or meaningful to someone else. I think the way to reconcile this contradiction is by dealing with issues that deeply affect me, hoping that they touch the lives of other people. In doing so, I must constantly question the limitations of my own perspective and ask what I can contribute.



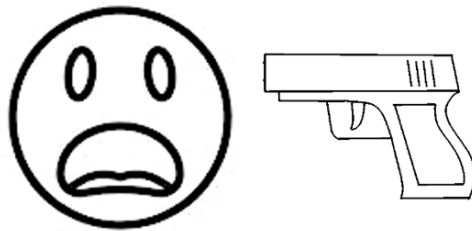
In one of my past collaborative projects, I organized an experimental performance event that included a gourmet dinner at an art gallery. While serving each course, my collaborators and I danced to pop music around the audience in an almost grotesque way that celebrated pleasure as a supreme value. In sharp contrast, while the audience ate the courses, we played recorded interviews we conducted with homeless people. The walls of the gallery were lined with pictures of selfies we took

with them. We invited the interviewees to attend the event for free, but none came. Nevertheless, we were full of pride as though we had given voice to those who are usually ignored. Looking back, I wonder if we took advantage of someone else's suffering to feel righteous. We gave our audience a moment of pleasure and something to think about. The homeless were given nothing.

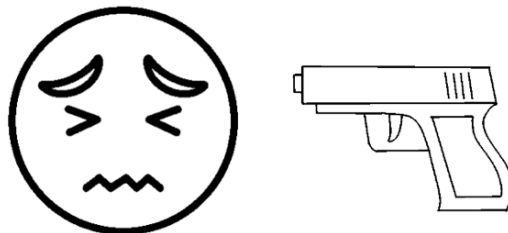


This experience showed me that sometimes when art tries to take from life, it can nevertheless remain detached from it. I wonder what we could have done differently. How can art not only *talk about* but *do* something?

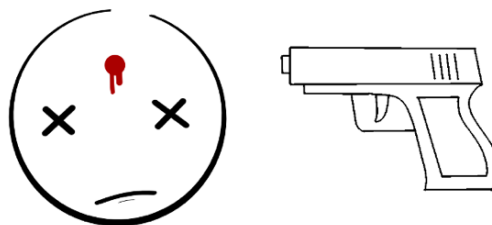
Locution, Illocution, Perlocution



He said to me 'Shoot her!'



He urged me to shoot her



He persuaded me to shoot her

With each BiP lecture and article, I found myself facing art's political implications. Many reflected a prevalent belief that in order to affect "real life," art must step out of the art-world and adopt anti-authoritarian approach subverting the established order. To sketch new landscapes of what can be seen, said and thought, the lines separating private from public must be dissolved as well as the boundary between the real and the fictional. All conventions, boundaries and categories are shattered, and a field without limit emerges. When prefixed aesthetic criteria are abandoned, everything becomes art. If everything is art, there is no art.

differance



This is a chair



This is not a chair

Precisely because of art's general trend against definitions, I find myself constantly trying to define what art is or, at least, what theater means to me. While asking myself these questions about theater's function and form, I wonder how close theater must be to life in order to influence social reality, to what degree should it be mediated through representation to allow for critical thinking.

D e c o n s t r u c t i o n
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N O W N E S S



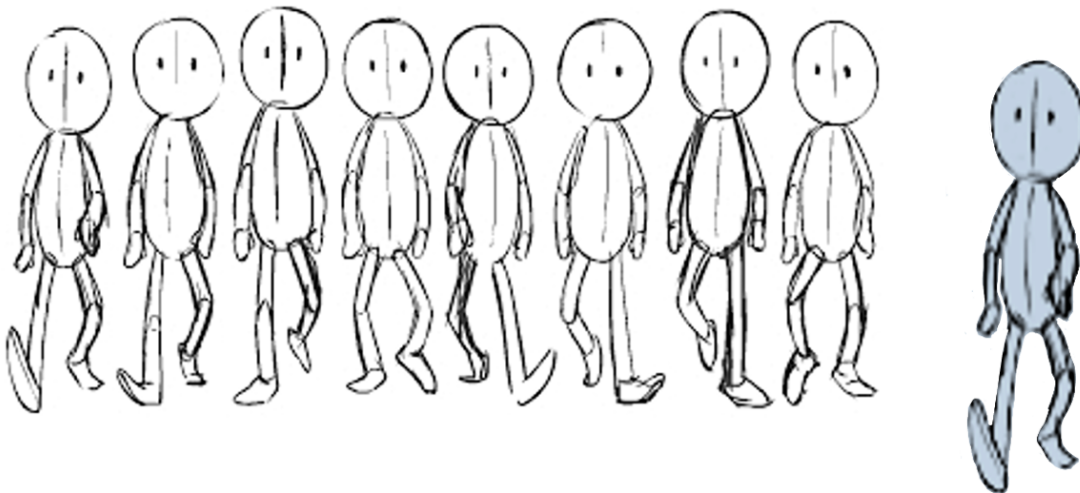
Adrian Heathfield's *Alive* traces recurrent lines in contemporary Live Art, one of which examines the human body as a site of experimentation through practices exploring physical limits, endurance or pain. I must admit that many of these practices, such as those of Franko B, Ron Athey and Oleg Kulik, repulsed me; I couldn't help but think that they must be mentally ill, masochistic or excessively attention-seeking. Heathfield argues that it is a popular misconception to believe that these performances are only meant to provoke a shock effect. Rather, he states that they are meant to create holes in our perception so that we struggle to create meaning of what we see. However, the shock these practices induced was so intense that I could not think of anything other than my shock. Would presenting an image of danger instead of engaging with



real physical risk not allow more space for thinking? What do we gain from real blood and not a representation of blood?

The performance artist Deborah De Robertis exposing her genitals in front of Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* made me consider this question further. The living body placed in front of its non-living representation and the different reactions to it highlight the living body's temporality, vulnerability and unpredictability, sharpening our sensitivity to its presence and revealing its potential subversive force. De Robertis's act confronts us directly with culturally ingrained shame, leading us to question our own.

we are the normative subjects

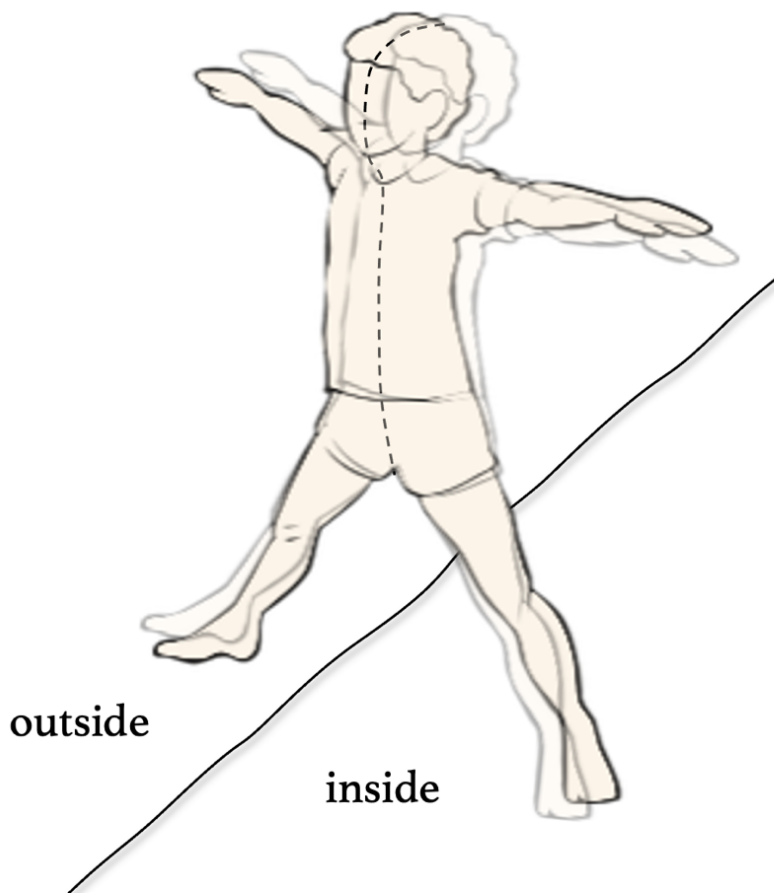


and I am a political domain

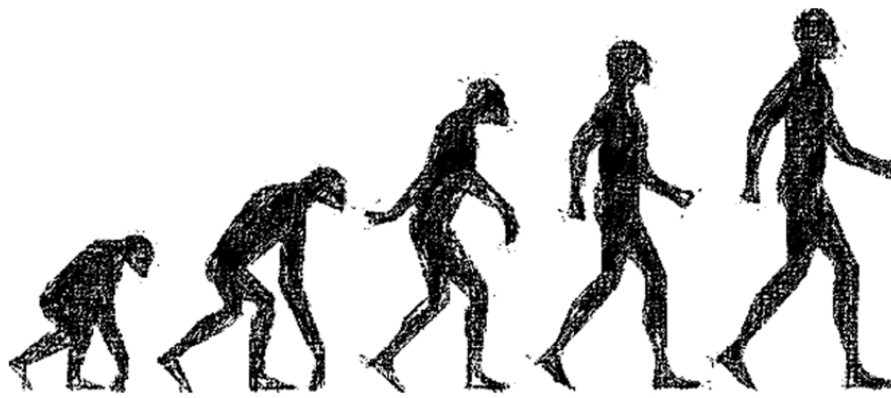
When I had to expose my shame in the shadow exercise in João's class, I learned not only about artistic expression's potentiality to release one from the constraints of preconception, but also about the fragility of the line between imagination and reality. We were asked to show the thing that is always there but hidden, to make visible the invisible. As a respected theater director in Israel, my father was and always will be the shadow that accompanies me. As I pondered how I can represent the father figure I am simultaneously trying to model and escape from, I realized that, more than anything, I am afraid of losing my shadow. A few years ago, my dad was diagnosed with cancer, and since then his shadow's shape has shifted. I recalled the mythological story about actor Michael Chekhov who sought to prove to his teacher Stanislavski that imagination is no less effective than empirical memory and told everyone in his acting class that his father had died. I was curious to know if I could do something similar by engaging with imagination as if it was real. Despite my awareness of my immediate surroundings, I was able to be simultaneously present in the fictional reality I created. With a stone in my hand as in Jewish tradition, I separated from my beloved shadow, and he was there more than ever.

Beyond feeling relieved by this public exposure, I was captivated by our human ability to imagine a false reality in such a tangible way. In her discussion of the primal scene, Phelan states that “an imagined history and a history of a real ocular experience have similarly weighted consequences for the psychic subject” (5). Isn't this the essence of theater, “keep[ing] two contradictory realities simultaneously in play” (Schechner, 125)? We watch fictional reality; we know that

The paradox of participation



it is not real and yet the emotional impact is similar to that of a real experience. Like dreams, theater gives us ground to practice reality. However, it should be acknowledged that the imaginary is drawn from familiar existential experience. I was able to imagine my father's grave, because this fear was for me real, familiar, known in some way.



Restored behaviors

The act of imagination, in my opinion, is equivalent to the act of imitation. While imagination is based on something that can be real, imitation is based on something that is already real; but neither is *the real thing*. In this regard, I find special interest in Cindy Sherman's imitation act. Sherman presents how women are styled in cinema according to the male gaze fantasy. In doing so, she creates a certain distance, because she does not present only herself, and she does not present only them, she represents them through herself. The characters she embodies in her photographs are appealing for being accurate imitations of something so familiar. I can identify these characters, but I would not stop to look at them as I stop to look at her photographs. Knowing that it is imitation sharpens my attention and senses to every nuance. The artistic demarcation, an interruption of the ordinary sequence of life that we indifferently pass through out of habit, puts the spotlight on the thing that was always there but that we did not stop to look at. Now, that it is framed in front of us, we linger over the lack of attention we have paid to it.

Brecht employed the distancing effect (Verfremdungseffekt) out of the view that excessive emotional involvement disrupts our objective observation and that a certain distance is required in order to provoke critical thinking. Following this concept, when I directed an actress in a monodrama written about her own experiences with sexual harassment, I made it clear from the very beginning that I was going to treat the story as a play and her as a character. We enhanced the distancing effect with metaphorical stage-images and other theatrical means that constantly reminded viewers that they were watching a play. My attempt to examine her story critically and to avoid portraying it one-sidedly may have come at the expense of a more personal, exposing subjective experience, such as that of De Robertis's live bare female genitalia versus its representation. Additionally, there are limitations in the attempt to reach an objective point of view beyond empirical experience and personal perspective.



simulation

If representation is a fictional reality and reality itself is constructed from fiction, then representation is, in fact, a double-fiction, and truth remains forever elusive. If there is no such thing as objectivity, why strive to attain it?

At the end of this module's reflection, I realize that I must accept, perhaps even embrace, my subjective point of view and acknowledge that my intention to attain objective truth is doomed to fail. While examining my work and the various techniques that contemporary performance art uses for social criticism, I looked at the pros and cons of the following two approaches: art that becomes life through an anti-representative approach in order to encourage activism and art that uses representation to allow the distance required for critical thinking. Inspired by Rancière, I would like to propose a **double-act** as a "third way," benefiting from each approach's potential. The first act incorporates art into life in order to foster social action and to deepen the artist's understanding; the second act then recontextualizes art in its delineated framework for critical re-evaluation. I hope this third way will help me redefine what theater means to me while learning how I may contribute to my community with my practice.

