

RESEARCHING SPIRITUAL PERFORMANCE

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Even since childhood, to me there has been no solid border between performance that is categorized as religious and those that are viewed as aesthetic. After going to church, we, the children, went home and played out the role of the priest, as well as numerous biblical scenarios, by aesthetic means. Old clothes and garments found in the loft became costumes. Places on the lawn became stages for acting. The now well-documented connection between dramaturgies of children's play and aesthetic expression also holds ground for what I call "spiritual performance."¹ The distance between *play*, on the one hand, and *prayer*, on the other, the distance between "serious life"² and fun, is not as far as often proclaimed. To the contrary, research has shown that in religious performance, fun is intertwined with faith.³ These facts have huge consequences for performance research.

Background

When looking at the various ways in which humans communicate, historically, as well as at the present time, it is clear that human communication is not, and has never been merely about communication between humans. It has also been concerned with communication between humans and non-humans. At least that is what comes through from the stories, as well as archeologically excavated reminiscences, of ancient cultures. But this is also true today. Relating to beings or entities that do not stand in front of us as humans is, in fact, a commonality found in human communication. This desire is as old as human communication itself, and as persistent in contemporary culture as ever before. Such beings have been at the centre stage of human performance, and still are.

Questions related to the reality of such beings (who they are, by whom they are created), as well as the reality of various forms of communication with them, is therefore of

¹ Hammer 2010

² Turner 1982: 69

³ See amongs others, Sax

importance. To my view, a clear distinction between the facts of what we call physical reality and the facts of what humans may experience as reality, has never been so intransigent as when presented by the rationality-driven materialistic paradigm. This is shown by the very fact that alongside with the positivistic materialistic and scientific paradigms that have been *worshipped* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, religion, as well as *quasi*-religious belief in political systems, ideas and/or *pure* academic thinking, has been deployed just as dominantly. Research into *people's culture* shows that when we as humans communicate with the world, we are not satisfied with staging a two or three-dimensional model of ourselves. We have, throughout history, as much as in the present, insisted on framing ourselves within a reality that extends the present into the past and future, and also into other dimensions existing simultaneously and interacting with the physical here-and-now.

The distinction between Belief and *non-belief* is often used in academic writing, and has spilled over into mainstream Western culture as a way of insisting that spiritual performance must be defined by a system of belief involving *credo*. I will argue here that such a distinction is counterproductive because it implies that interpretation and *meaning* come before *experience*. It is reductionist in two ways. Firstly it implies that meaning is the end purpose of performance. All performance theory points to the contrary. Secondly, it involves a preconception that belief is a specific set of contents. I do, however hold such concepts of distinction to be counterproductive, because it is my opinion that experience in and of performance is a constituting part of the human sense of reality. If human experience is at the core of the matter of communication, as I discuss it here, then it can be argued that a discussion of belief or non-belief does not so much clarify, as distort the contents. Such a distinction by itself is implied and argued from the grounds of reductionism. This also implies the necessity to distinguish between *spiritual experience* and *institutionalised religion*.

Developing a vocabulary for spiritual performance at this time, when totalitarian approaches towards religion are knocking on our doors from several different directions, is more crucial than ever. If we can teach ourselves to be able to experience and, together,

as researchers within various fields of human communication, stay *with* the experience, and stay *present* in it long enough to formulate our own thoughts and terms, then mind sets that escape the reality of experience and leap into totalitarian belief may be more easily dethroned.

I will argue that systems of belief that are grounded in explicit *credo*, with claims to limited or singular modes of interpretation, are functions of the same misconception of human communication that the belief/non-belief distinction is a part of. In arguing this I will make use of the theories on myth and ritual that originated with what is known as the *Cambridge school of anthropology* around the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴ I will take a moment to briefly summarise their argument, being that the great religions of the world, all originating from the Middle East, were in fact, not rooted in a set *credo*, but in *practice*. The practices of ancient religion, it can be argued, did not originate in a set belief, a *credo*, but in the *practice of communication* with beings or entities that humans, and human societies had the need to communicate to or with. These practices were necessary in order for ancient humans to organize life experience, and also to structure their societies according to seasons and other habitual conditions. *Credo*, here meaning a set of ideas or beliefs that shall, and must, go with certain practices, is considered to be a rather modern invention that has little to do with individual or collective human experience of other beings or entities as such. It has, on the contrary, been constructed in later times as a measure to maintain order and keep power structures in place in societies.

From the point of view of communication, the ontological status of beings or entities deployed in human ritual for human purposes in ancient ritual, as well as in *magic* practiced today, is irrelevant at this moment in time. What is relevant to the actor or participant of such practices is that the need to communicate to and with them has merged, and has been upheld as something humans need to do. Therefore, they need to be described on their own terms. That is, on the terms of those by, or through, which they

⁴ See Segal, Robert, ed page 1-118 for a presentation of the Cambridge anthropologist's dramaturgical approach to ancient ritual; see Jane Harrison, Gilbert Murray and S.H.Hooke in particular.

are *experienced*.

Implications for Theatre and Performance research

Performance research is a meeting point where fields of study traditionally separated by lineages and categorisations of research, terminology, methods, and fields of subjects are challenged. More specifically, I am thinking of the traditionally strong, but sometimes permeated, boundaries between the studies of religion, spirituality, and theatre.

Highlighting these as *one* field of research can be accomplished by way of utilising some of the highly contested, but very useful terminology of my own field of research, which is theatre and performance studies. The notions of *performance* and *theatricality*, largely discussed over the last decades by prominent scholars in the field, when utilised as analytical tools for phenomena that have previously been categorised and defined by *belief*, make these phenomena, in my view, available to the participant and researcher in ways that would not otherwise be possible.

In order to establish a broad spectrum and encircle the specific qualities of what I call *spiritual performance*, it is necessary to employ description and observation of many different categories and genres of performance that have in common a relation to a spiritual presence. The use of theatre and performance studies terminology will show the connections and similarities between diverse performative events, which are in some way framed by the activities of *play* and of *prayer*. Aligning and comparing different forms of performative expressions within diverse contexts also leads to an investigation of the research terminology as such, and opens up new avenues for further theoretical investigation. Such boundary exploration is, to me, the most fun and exciting way of challenging the terms themselves, exploring their inherent meanings, and inventing new ones. Exploring by way of telling stories and recapitulating various performative experiences is how these terms will be presented here, and this process is also intimately linked to the activities *performance*, *theatricality*, and *play*. The term *Spiritual performance* is suggested here as a place from which to explore a variety of performative events in which humans perform their relationship to spiritual experience, as it appears in social and aesthetic forms. Other important terms that have emerged as potent and useful

for research, while also in need of constant redefinition by the process of contextualisation in my work, are notions of *presence*, *dramaturgy*, *experience*, *inter-subjectivity*, *transpersonal*, *prayer*, *play*, *truth*, and *love*.

Even if *performance* is a category most often pointing to something *framed off*, to me there is no fundamental difference between Spiritual and non-spiritual performance, just as there is also no fundamental difference between the social, the aesthetic, and the spiritual. Frames are always interchanging and overlapping, whether they are perceived as products of the mind, products of rocks or wooden props, or rocks of the mind. When the *sacred* is conceived as something *set apart*, depending on a binary model, is always temporary, and when engaged in a process of *play*, the notion of the spiritual, or of sacredness, transgresses its own boundaries. The fluidity of Spiritual performance is, in fact, one of its characteristics. Therefore, in my recent research, I do not use the concept of *ritual* when referring to *Spiritual Performance*, unless relating to specific circumstances. Rather, I find it useful to deploy a variety of theatricalities or *theatricals*, in order to describe the interrelations between elements within an event and between different events. There are many forms of Spiritual performance that have no similar traits to *ritual*, or even to *ritualisation*. I could have gone the other way, by searching for *ritual* characteristics in different forms of performance, but I have found this to be counterproductive to the task of describing performative events in the fullness of their presence. The *is* or the *as* of performance has been of less interest, as I have simply assumed *Spiritual performance* to mean *that which takes place when humans perform in order to call into being a spiritual presence*.

“All ground is sacred,” an old man said to me long ago as I sat in his flowering garden shedding tears of homesickness on the grass. Not setting apart Spiritual performance as distinct from other theatricals is an approach that also implies a certain statement concerning theatre, as well as religious performance: if all ground is sacred, not only what is sacred to me may be considered to be sacred. We must also include in our research what is sacred to *the other*. Approaching diverse ways of spiritual performance must therefore be a dramaturgical journey of living into the *other* on many levels. But the

field of performance research may give tools to approach such experiences in non-judgemental ways.

Performance, whether experienced as religion, as experimental theatre dedicated to a holy task, or as *something else* that may not easily be categorised, today actualises *theatrical events* in the midst of a revival of *faith* from which not even the most purist aesthetics can escape. Dramaturgies that involve spiritual reference demand attention to processes of communication that transgress the boundaries between aesthetics and the spiritual. I suggest that researchers look for parallels, coincidences, conflicts, confusions, mutual suspicions, and mutual inspirations that are woven into any contact between theatre and religious performance, in life, and on sacred and profane stages. In order to investigate this field it is necessary to abandon the segregation between performance and spirituality in their descriptions of performance.⁵

Historically too, this is true. John Dewey's argument of the inseparability of art from life, also speaks of the interlinking between spirituality and the arts from the perspective of human cultural evolution:

The introduction of the supernatural into belief and the all too human easy reversion to the supernatural is much more an affair of the psychology that generates works of art than of effort at scientific and philosophical explanation. It intensifies emotional thrill and punctuates the interests that belong to all break of familiar routine. Were the hold of the supernatural on human thought an exclusively – or even mainly – intellectual matter, it would be comparatively insignificant. Theologies and cosmogonies have laid hold of imagination because they have been attended with solemn processions, incense, embroidered robes, music, the radiance of colored lights, with stories that stir wonder and induce hypnotic admiration. That is, they have come to man through a direct appeal to the sense and to sensuous imagination. Most religions have identified their

⁵ Victor Turner's work makes an important point of reference here, but my present approach goes further as I take a different direction based on changes that have taken pace in Performance in the last decades.

sacraments with the highest reaches of art, and the most authoritative beliefs have been clothed in a garb of pomp and pageantry that gives immediate delight to eye and ear and that evokes massive emotions of suspense, wonder, and awe.⁶

Clearly, the aesthetics of performance is not best described by limiting its dynamics to be about *art only*.

A *performative approach*, describing staged encounters as performance, regardless of what kind of belief or intentions of faith that lie behind, is a way of avoiding the divisions that Dewey has described so well: that limitations of the analytical frames of disciplines make the impressions become fragmented and separated. Yes, I am aware that some of the boundaries he described have long since been crossed, and for that I am grateful. Nevertheless, the boundary between sacred and profane performance is one that stands strongly in the minds not only of “ordinary people” on the street, but also among academics, artists and the dedicated religious. The mutual suspicion between those who *believe* and those who reject this belief is very strong and alive.

The fields of theatre and performance studies, since freeing themselves to a certain extent from the written word and literary studies as their methodical bases, have predominantly lingered between qualitative social science and the hermeneutics of humanities.

Methodological approaches are highly contestable in a field of research that aims to extend perspectives, rather than producing categories. I will suggest that performative events are best researched on the grounds of how they function in the *now*, in a certain place, with a certain audience or participants. This also implies the necessity of the researcher to be true to his or her position of *involvement*, and to explicitly express such involvement in descriptions of research. Just as theatre and performance studies have turned from non-contextual views of *staged performance* to the context of performance as *event*,⁷ so must methodological approaches in the field of theatre studies take into consideration ethnographic methods that are inscribed within the theatrical or

⁶ Dewey, 30.

⁷ Sauter, 2000, 2006

performative event itself. The ethnographer Ruth Behar refers to the turn in the field of anthropology, as well as humanistic disciplines, as *native anthropology*, in which scholars claim a personal connection to the places in which they work.⁸ Behar claims that one consequence of this shift is the opportunity of “viewing identification, rather than difference, as the key defining image of anthropological theory and practice.”⁹ The consequence of viewing performative situations as *event* also presses the question of explicitly expressing cultural belonging, distance, mind and emotions of the participant observers of, and within, an event. Aspects of presence are widely scrutinised and debated in aesthetics and in theatre studies, but the observer’s participatory role, dependent on her/his personal cultural story, has been of less notice. There is no reason to believe, however, that aesthetic experience, or, what may also be named *experience of spirit*, should be any less dependent on such personal cultural history than are other categories of experience. There is a challenge and a paradox in this statement. The toughness of vulnerability is a challenge. The path is narrow, walking between the inside and the outside, embracing both and neither, processing sentiment and embracing *naïveté*.

An Example of Research: Spiritualist Groups

Groups and individuals claiming to receive messages from the spirit world are not new to the study of theatre. Human performance from shamanistic rituals to spiritualist practices and practices with magic in the late nineteenth century have made claims to communicate with spirits. These practices are diverse, and have attracted increased interest in popular culture over the last decade. Scientific research, with its experimental methods and demand for physical verification has had little luck in investigating various phenomena. Therefore, such phenomena are commonly brushed away as *fantasy* on the one hand, or claimed by practitioners to be beyond science, on the other. Discussions on the matter tend to end in a non-productive claim of belief or non-belief.¹⁰

⁸ Behar, 29.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Parapsychology and transpersonal psychology may have something to add to this debate. Such experiences may be investigated further if taken up by researchers working within these disciplines.

Another way of approaching practices of communication with the spiritual world is by participating in them, and viewing them as situations of performance. During the course of my research, I have accepted invitations to take part in the activities of several different spiritualist groups, all of which emphasise the *work* aspect of such practices, and I have had the opportunity to follow the processes of communication in these groups over a period of six months. I have observed and participated in what I have experienced to be complex and many-layered modes of communication that involve performative expression on an individual level, within group dynamics, and between individuals. These circles, as they are referred to by the participants, practice an open field of communication in which fantasy and truth are not necessarily separate fields, *and thus claim a form of truth clearly transgressing a common Western notion of the division between facts and fiction/fantasy. This truth is constituted by the performance of each participant, while framed by the group energy.* I have experienced these group practices to be anti-authoritarian and polyphonic in their expressions and perceptions. They are based on acceptance and respect of individual experience. This is in opposition to many other practices of popular culture, as well as institutional religion, in which power games and abuse are not unusual when individuals claim authority over others by referring to spiritual truth.

The main question in my investigation into these practices has been: *Who is performing what, for whom, by which means, and for what purpose?* These questions also imply that I have been able to address power-issues regarding spiritual practices.

The frame of the group circle practices I have researched in New Zealand¹¹ is a mixture of play and work, of participation in serious life, and joy and fun in relating to other human participants, and also to spirits present. Spirit is performed by human participation in the group, and can only manifest through human presence. This is the spiritual work. This work requires a particular kind of attentive presence that includes observation of what takes place in the body, in the imagination, and in sight and sound during the session. Simultaneously it requires a readiness to express these experiences, verbally or

¹¹ See Hammer 2010, p.53-59 ad p.240-384

otherwise, so that individuals and the group as a whole are able to *fill in* detailed communication of the various experiences of other participants that are taking place. One way of describing this process is by referring to vertical and horizontal axes working simultaneously— if personified spirits are referred to as a vertical axis, and expression towards the group as a horizontal axis. The clue to communicating, then, is keeping these axes at work simultaneously. The kind of presence required is an awareness of what takes place, as well as a willingness and ability to express this in a non-interpretive fashion. The aspect of *translation* from one realm to another, from the spiritual to the here-and-now of the sensuous present, while not undertaking interpretation as according to laws of the rational mind, is the challenge. What is required is attaining while awake a consciousness more similar to a dream state.

The challenge of the situation in these sessions, as well as of research, is to capture the experiences taking place, which may be described as polyphonic in its variety of statements from different people, while referring to the same sense of presence. Describing these experiences without interpreting them is a challenge for the participants and the researcher. Interpretations often come in the way of fresh experience, and the limitation of everyday vocabulary in describing these experiences is huge. Characters appearing from the spirit realm are felt in the body and expressed by referring to the sensuous realm, and thus they are performed by the bodies belonging to the members of the group.

One of the main tasks of my research will be to describe the performance of spiritual presence that takes place within the frame of such a group in a vocabulary that neither reduces nor adds to that which has taken place. This requires thorough descriptions and skilled observations of individual, collective and interactional structures.

As I understand it, the *exercise* taking place in this circle, has to do with getting oneself into a mood or a state of *selective inattention*. In order to be able to receive, or to sense spirit, one has to concentrate on not concentrating, and be in a state where, in a certain sense, one pretends to do something else, while, at the very same time, being extremely

attentive and aware of the *other* sensuous impressions one is experiencing. This process of sensation of the other, another world of presence, is related to the body. It requires awareness in the body of what is at any time present, and an ability to stay with it long enough to sense it without making a premature interpretation of it

I view the situation of sitting in a *spiritual circle* as a theatrical situation. Encounters between people, levels, and characters are staged. They are set for the spirits to perform in service to humans, and the total performance contains both human and spiritual characters. It is faith in communication between different levels of *worlds* that enables these performances. Without this faith they would not take place. They are framed by prayerful communion, which, according to James, involves the appearance of something “which in one sense is part of ourselves and in another sense is not ourselves,” but which “raises our centre of personal energy and produces regenerative effects unattainable in other ways.”¹² But they are also dependent on a distinct activity of what may be named by the term *theatrical play*. The selective inattention of the circle is a way of playing with one’s own, and each other’s, consciousness in order to open ways of perceiving what takes place in the room by means that are not habitual, but have in them a strong element of *otherness* that I associate with *making the known new* and *unfamiliar*. This in turn creates an association to *poetic language* and to Victor Shklovsky’s notion of *defamiliarisation*.¹³ It is as if the descriptions of present sensations are loaded with possibilities of experiencing the *other*. The experiences of spirits as personified are described in both situations above. These personifications are spoken *to* in prayer, as well as spoken *of* by reference to sensations and messages through words that are performed by the participants. These activities also strongly create a sense of community. All these aspects will be of importance in the descriptions to come. There is another issue, however, to do with the purpose of these activities, which must be addressed in order for this work to make sense: namely, the ethical perspective.

¹² James, 403-404.

¹³ Shklovsky, Victor. 1970:213.

Any theatrical practice may be viewed as a laboratory for exploring the human dynamics of relationships.¹⁴ This is, in part, to do with the display of character that takes place in theatre. Character, as is well known, is secondary to plot in Aristotelian dramaturgy.¹⁵ Regarding the situations described above, however, it may be that our actions are played out as prescribed by an inner director whose existence we have not made ourselves conscious of (unless, as in dramatic action, one has a consciousness of character). This inner director has been described by the psychotherapist Marilyn Morgan¹⁶ as automatic patterns that human beings utilise in survival strategies. In theatre, there is an aim for characters to be individualised. In real life, we more often play out characters as *patterns*. It is these patterns of characters – raw, non-individualised and struggling for survival – that are in action in some social and performing situations and prevent human beings from experiencing the nuances of spirit and individual life. The dynamics between characters, individuals, collectives, and spiritual presence are complex, and it would be foolish to pretend to possess an insight that would map all these layers and interactions, particularly as they shift and evolve over time. One suggestion based on the present material, however, would be that perhaps our creation of character, whether perceived as psychological acting or spiritual representation, is created more in accordance with a *we* and *us* than in accordance with the *I* and *me*, as we often presume.

Thus, the spirit world is not viewed or revealed as a realm in which everyone is enlightened and perfect. By the reading of the night it seems clear that the view of the group, towards spirit, is that communication with spirits not only opens up possibilities for human beings, but for those in spirit, too. The idea, then, is fundamentally one of communication. I slowly come to view the work being done in this circle as a laboratory of communication, a situation where in order to take on a meditative approach to communication, the lights are shut off and everyone's attention is directed towards the centre of the room. Freely and willingly, these people gather in order to meet their own capacity for communicating on many levels. Some of this work is to recognise the communication that takes place within oneself, how physical presence, thoughts, feelings,

¹⁴ See Hammer pp. 40-41.

¹⁵ Aristotle, 35-38.

¹⁶ Morgan, Marilyn 2008b. *The Book of Character*. Napier: EIT.

and sensations interact with each other within the field of one individual and between individuals. Only by developing awareness of these inner processes can one be able to distinguish between emotions, wants, and needs that are one's own, and what belongs to others. Such awareness is not easily achieved. It involves a lifetime of learning. Only through awareness in experience can such capacity be achieved as distinguishing between self, other, group energy, and individual energy. Distinguishing spirit from human in order to separate oneself from it and merging with spirit and with other humans are a necessity if these practices are to be clear, discerning, and helpful in the long run.

The awareness described above is, I hold, also the kind of awareness that a performance researcher must strive to hold in a research setting, whether perceiving spiritual experience or not. There is a lot of learning in becoming aware of one's own sensations and revealing and emptying oneself of preconceptions, rather than hiding them behind abstract terminology.

More on the Necessity of Experience and Involvement

When John Dewey states: "An angler may eat his catch without thereby losing the esthetic satisfaction he experienced in casting and playing,"¹⁷ he is pointing to *experience* as a process in which various stages are framed by states of the mind. Evolvement over time, of framing and re-framing are involved – even in the simple experience of the interaction of the angler with his catch. In his introduction to *Art as Experience*¹⁸ Dewey argues that as art becomes separate from other life experience, "[a] peculiar esthetic 'individualism' results," and that in modern society this "operate[s] to create also a chasm between ordinary and esthetic experience." The purpose of his work, though, he describes in this way:

It is to indicate that *theories* which isolate art and its appreciation by placing them in a realm of their own, disconnected from other modes of experiencing, are not inherent in the subject-matter but arise because of specifiable extraneous

¹⁷ Dewey, 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9 -11.

conditions.¹⁹

“The nature of the problem,” Dewey says, is “that of recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal process of living,”²⁰ and Dewey goes on to argue that as art theory sets aesthetic experience apart from ordinary life, it *spiritualises* it away from the objects. Dewey, to the contrary, is looking for those qualities in the experience of art, to find “a conception that discloses the way in which *these works idealize qualities found in common experience*.”²¹ Dewey, writing in the nineteen-thirties, is asking for an approach to aesthetic experience that today in contemporary theory is breaking through to situated knowledge. The situated knowledge of *experience* refers to fun and prayer, art and social experience as aspects of the very same events, and locations.

Obviously, the strict distinction between religion as *serious life* from which the meaning of life is derived, and the arts as non-useful, separate, or entertainment, is a notion that belongs to secularism. In many Eastern societies it is, however, taken for granted that play and prayer belong together. The Gods are, more than anything, playful beings, and it is at the courtesy of the Gods’ play that the destinies of human beings are shaped. William Sax describes this well in his introduction to the book *The gods at Play: Lila in South Asia*, where he writes of the Indian concept *lila*: “it refers not only to the supreme being’s playful actions but also to the dramatic plays staged by human beings in memory of these actions.”²² These are, however, *collective* experiences.

Addressing questions regarding *experience of, with, and in performance* must be done on several levels, and as I have suggested,²³ on levels of the *individual*, the *interactive*, and the *collective* levels. I here tentatively use the term *levels*. Looking back to Dewey’s example of the angler, the complexity of describing experience when it takes place as interaction between individuals and groups cannot be underestimated. The problem is, of course, that experience cannot be noted as anything but individual experience, as there

¹⁹ Ibid., 10.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. (My italics)

²² Sax, William (ed.). 1995:3.

²³ Hammer 2010

always has to be an individual statement or account of something that is or has been experienced. The challenge, then, is how to describe experience that is shared, maintaining the individual account, whilst also giving credit to the experience being shared.

To the typical Westerner, whose cultural interpretation over the last hundred years has been steadily and increasingly more individually centred, it may seem alien to even claim that an experience is not only individual, but also collective, and that two or more individuals may actually come up with core similarities in experiencing the same event or encounter. So focused on individualism has our cultural interpretation become, that we may consider it foreign, or impossible, that the core of an experience that is shared may be more fundamental to the description of it, than the individual description of it. Focusing on communal experience is focusing on *doing* together.

The influential theatre theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte in her work *The Transformative Power of Performance*, refers to “transformance” as the transformation of the spectator into an *experiencing* and *acting* subject, as the result of receiving an object of art.²⁴ The non-referential character of performance that has physical presence and action in a place here-and-now as its sole focus, *transforms* the spectator’s expectations as well as their actions, according to Fischer-Lichte. In referring to the situation of experimental performance,²⁵ she states that “[t]his reality was not merely interpreted by the audience but first and foremost *experienced*.”²⁶ Fisher-Lichte describes the spectator’s position in these situations as one in which performer and spectators “were all involved in a common situation of here-and-now, transforming everyone present into co-subjects,” and “[t]he position of subject and object could no longer be clearly defined or distinguished from one another.”²⁷ She underlines the fact that due to the acute physical character of the performance, interpretation of meaning was not at the core of the audiences’ experience. The central concern of the performance was not to understand but to experience it and

²⁴ Fischer-Lichte, Erika. 2008.11-23.

²⁵ Marina Abramovic’s performance *Lips of Thomas* in 1975, as well as performances by Joseph Beuys and the FLUXUS group in the 1960’s.

²⁶ Fischer-Lichte 2008: 16-17

²⁷ Fischer-Lichte 2008: 17.

cope with these experiences, which could not be supplanted there and then by reflection.²⁸

This insight applies to the spiritual practices discussed earlier. Situations involving communal experience that relate to events over time and touch on more aspects of life than are present in the moment allow for an altered sense of presence and for reflection. In distinguishing theatrical liminal experience from ritual experience, Fischer-Lichte claims the audience experience taking place during a theatrical event to be of an aesthetic nature. In stating this, she is redefining the concept of the *liminality of aesthetic experience* “as a process of transformation undergone while participating in a theatre performance.”²⁹ She notices that:

Contemporary modern festivals, sports matches, rock and pop concerts, demonstrations and many other newly invented genres of cultural performance allow such temporary, ephemeral communities that do not ask for any longer-lasting commitment nor for a collective identity to emerge.³⁰

That this is so is undoubtedly true. Even more important to study, however, are those cases in which theatricals function in such a way that they have a lasting impact on those who take part. This is possible only if performative encounters are situated in some form of community.

From another angle, it is also my standpoint that *experience*, in all kinds of performance, be it a mainstream opera event, a church mass, a shamanic event, a playback theatre performance, take place on several levels that interact with each other a –sometimes in a very playful manner. Although these levels of experience take place simultaneously, there will be various times during a performance when one level or *mode* of experience will be prominent at the cost of others. I have found it useful to distinguish between *individual experience*, *interactive experience*, and *collective experience*. *Transpersonal*

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Fisher-Lichte. 2005.

³⁰ Ibid., 257.

experience is made possible when different levels or modes of experience taking place in a performance shift between these levels. Of course, this threesome is an abstraction only, and during research there will be experience that moves between them and joins in subtle combinations that may result in a heightened intensity of experience that includes the transpersonal. As hard as it is to come to terms with the concept of experience on a collective level, there is, however, quite a rich source of material from which to derive concepts and descriptions of experience on this individual level. Experience that takes place in or through interaction with other individuals on a one-to-one level, or even when more people are involved, which is initiated from one individual to another, is what I in my recent research have called *interactive experience*. This level is not to be considered as something *building* between one and three, however, as it may or may not take on that function.

Another important aspect of experience is when interactive experience takes place within one individual as part of the process of interaction with other individuals, or with characters or objects. Such experiences must be discussed in relation to their contexts and to the variations in which they appear. Some of these experiences may open up unknown aspects within the individual herself, and those are of particular interest, since they are not yet defined by *creed*.

Experience on a *collective level* refers to what in common language may be talked of as an *atmosphere*: something that may be felt, more weakly or strongly. Experienced actors often have a keen sense of this kind of, or level of, experience. As one of the most celebrated comedy actresses in Norway, with some fifty years of stage experience once asked me, “Can you explain to me why six hundred people in a bad mood can come to the theatre on the very same night?”³¹ What she is referring to here is a phenomenon familiar to all who have spent a lot of time performing in front of an audience. The production is the same every night, but the atmosphere, the quality of experience of communication, is different every night. Sometimes it is easy to go on stage, as there may be a lifting flow of support and positive anticipation seemingly streaming from the

³¹ Lystad, Elsa. Informal conversation, November 2006.

audience. At other times one experiences no flow at all, just hard work that may or may not be rewarded. A collective field may be large, or it may be small. In some cases it may extend itself to a whole community – or even a whole society.³² Needless to say, these kinds of fields have strong political and moral influence in society.

For experience to be situated, however, the three levels described above need to be involved. *Doing* and *undergoing*,³³ as laid out by Dewey, need to be part of the same experience in order for performance to have real and lasting effects on groups and individuals. Situated knowledge is needed in order to describe and understand such processes.

Because the qualities revealed in a performative event can only be described by involvement in the situation, I have, to the best of my ability, try to present detailed descriptions of the events, as accurately as possible, as they are experienced. These details may thus be considered as to be *true* as to the fact of what has been taking place at, and within, a specific event. Any other approach would simply not make any sense. But, as we know, two or more people present at the very same event, the same performance, may perceive the experience entirely differently. There is, therefore, a need to describe the facts of what is taking place in the situation of research, as outer, physical appearances, like place, surroundings, colour, light, music, bodies and movement, as accurately as possible, thus separating them from the descriptions of the effects that I, myself, an informant, or other informants say this has had on them. But there is also a need to describe situations in which experiences of inner and outer realities are blurred and overlap. I have read the centennial edition of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*³⁴ with great interest, and in particular his thoughts on method and approaches of pragmatism when approaching religious phenomena. James' thorough descriptions of personal accounts of religious experience are indeed a great gift in relation to the research of spiritual performance. Some of the examples given by James point directly to encounters between *invisible* characters in interaction with a subject, and

³² Rothenbuhler, Eric and Mihai Coman (eds). 2005: 199-209.

³³ Dewey 1934

³⁴ James, William. 2002.

thus, to me, activates a main research question: Who is performing to whom, and on which level of consciousness? In addressing these questions the separation of what is sensuously present and what takes place on levels of consciousness that are not sensuously based, sometimes breaks down.

Loving Research

Intimate descriptions of spiritual experience, on ethical grounds, demands a certain attitude in writing. A component of *love* will necessarily have to be at the heart of approaching any human activity or presence with which one is concerned. Approaching a human activity without a *force of love* for the human is to me synonymous with reducing it to less than it is. What is this love? It seems necessary, then, to say something about what love is *not*, in my use of the term. It is not a Romantic notion. It is not based on feeling. The love I am referring to here is more accurately described as a *force*. This *force* is about truth, honesty, the urge to pursue what takes place in a mode of understanding, and of being in touch with reality. These are the forces that urge us to understand reality as it unfolds in the present. Sometimes the researcher may have rather mixed emotions about some of the encounters they are to describe. Sometimes one may feel euphoric, at other times critical and sometimes appalled. Still, the force to go on describing the events needs to be one of wanting to be true to what has been revealed by others, and what I myself have experienced. This is some of what I mean by describing love as a force. Perhaps this is the same love that Dewey refers to when speaking of art craftsmanship: “Craftsmanship to be artistic in the final sense must be *loving*; it must care deeply for the subject matter upon which skill is exercised.”³⁵

Further, as Dewey speaks of the process between *doing* and *undergoing*³⁶ as one involving the creative act by an artist as well as the experience of the receiver, as one of mutual interchange, I find his words valid also for carrying out research by means of participating in the events and trans-subjective situations that I refer to here. Perception of process is at the heart of partaking in spiritual performance. I am thinking of

³⁵ Dewey, 47-48.

³⁶ Dewey 1934

perception while experiencing performative events when Dewey says: “Perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy. To steep ourselves in a subject-matter we have first to step into it.”³⁷ Is this the act of love? As it is not my intention to define the word love here, in a general manner, but rather to use the term as a keyword for how to approach the various phenomena encountered in fieldwork research, I will not embark on a discussion to define the term. In identifying love as a force in and behind my approach, as well as a quality of perception, I have stated an attitude. To my view any research undertaken that is not motivated by such a *force* is *doomed* to be *reductive*. Not necessarily by quantity, but by quality. Seeing someone or something by the force of love is entirely different from seeing it without this force. Lack of love in relationships between humans in any situation is, in fact, a reduction of everyone present in that situation. One may even call such an attitude *dehumanisation*. The force of love is what brings reality, truth. It is that which in any human situation uncovers the specific quality of the other, in its own right. It is anti-detachment. It is the realisation that treating anyone or anything as an *object* is actually depriving them of the truth of what they are in their own right. Take love away from human life, and it becomes perverted. Take loving force away from research and it becomes mystifying, strange or out of touch with reality. Love, however, must never be misinterpreted as synonymous with entering into a situation without awareness. On the contrary, being aware of sympathies and antipathies in a situation, while observing them, with *mindfulness* is a part of love’s ways. This also means meeting the challenge of presenting experiences that have been less rewarding, or for which I as a researcher have little personal sympathy, with sincerity and with awareness of the qualities of my own as well as others’ involvement in the situations. This is a challenging task as far as the style of writing is concerned.

Love is being in touch with what there is, what is present. It is the inclusion of all that is experienced, on all accounts of an event. To me, therefore, research must involve a process of love. But what do I mean by this *love*? Firstly, it is important to look around and see what works in life and research, and what does not. When looking at people

³⁷ Ibid., 53.

working together in research project, for instance, or forming relationships in theatrical or other performative environments, the way that sustainable relationships are made is typically not by *similar interests*, but by what is talked of as *chemistry*. People that become attracted to each other and like each other are likely to be able form sustainable relationships that enable them to come up with interesting research or living performance that works for themselves and others. A *loving* relationship must not be confused with one that lacks awareness and reflection, however – quite to the contrary. Approaching fieldwork situations, and the material generated from these, with love, is a quest to realize what is well known in the field of psychology and psychotherapy, and there is no reason why research or performance situations should represent an exemption to this. The psychotherapist Marilyn Morgan puts it this way:

Contributing to safety and the provision of developmentally appropriate, loving relationship that facilitates growth is what Winnicott (1965) called a facilitating environment, or *holding*. This is vital for healthy development in infants, and according to Kegan (1982), the need for a holding environment continues into adult life.³⁸

When discussing the place of *love* in the education of psychotherapists, an environment that involves focus on academic achievement as well as a nurturing emotional environment, Morgan quotes Ron Kurtz, the founder of Hakomi therapy:

Being with a person who is experienced as both present and caring would seem to me to be a completely natural and effective context for learning to occur. I talk about loving presence this way: It would not be far from the truth to say it is a field – a field of emotional energy, carried perhaps by pheromones, a gentle touch, or the limbic system resonances generated by the body, face and voice of another, or even by the electromagnetic waves passing from one heart and mind to

³⁸ Morgan, Marilyn. 2008a. *The Alchemy of Love*. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 106.

another. Loving presence places a field around the other, a field that holds the pure intention to protect, to care for, and to help with another's healing.³⁹

To place a field around one's work to protect, help and care for, is, as I see it, what is required to live into one's research situations and the material which it creates. The field of *love* around my research has made it a place of opportunity for *learning*. Learning is what research is about.

As a researcher, taking part in various activities, one is often generously accepted in to environments of people who have chosen to place their trust in us. This is part of love too: feeling acceptance on both parties, so that one may ask the questions that will lead to further questions and answers in an atmosphere that hopefully promotes knowledge for all involved. As long as research involves human interaction, it is imperative that research situations should hold the same ethical standards that one would require in all other human relations. This also includes the way fieldwork situations are referred to in writing.

Not so seldom does the claim of performing *critical academic analysis*, become an excuse for not listening at all to what message is given, for not taking the time to listen to the atmosphere and contents of what is said or is taking place, but rather rushing to express one's own preconceptions of the present. If the ability to bring a sense of *awareness of presence* into a situation is lacking, whether it concerns a performance or a discussion or another life event, to me there is little value in what takes place in it or comes out of it, even if the most impressive intellectual criticism is derived from it.

These aspects of research are very real, and they have been gravely understated in the presentation of most research. Behar addresses the problems of the researcher who reveals her personal sentiment in her research in her important work *The Vulnerable Observer*.⁴⁰ She acknowledges that "there are risks in exposing oneself in an academy

³⁹ Kurtz, Ron, in Morgan 2008a, 105.

⁴⁰ Behar 1996.

that continues to feel ambivalent about observers who forsake their mantle of omniscience.”⁴¹

In spite of this fact, I believe that aspects related to love is a very determining factor in all research situations. To this I would comment that if love in this context is to be considered a factor to be ashamed of, or at all costs to be hidden, that point of view is, in its way, equal to degrading one’s own humanistic research in the light of a positivist dogma that the field of humanities has long since prized itself of having transgressed. Perhaps love, and with it, *joy*, is the last taboo of the humanities. Research for love or joy’s own sake, should, to my view, be high on the agenda in humanistic research. Love tends to be playful. It creates a field characterised by fluidity between frames of mind and interactions. When Schechner writes of *dark play*,⁴² he characterises it, among others, as play that dissolves frames. Dark play, however, may be described in a simple way. It is play that lacks concern for the other: it is play without love. Without a loving presence any activity turns into its own double. The need for love is the most understated notion among academics.

Love and the joy that comes with it is the only quality that people cannot live without—and neither can research. Denying this is not in accordance with research realities. The *Maori* word for love is *Aroha*. *Aroha* gives right to freely express,” says Jude Roberts.⁴³ In a rehearsal situation in theatre, for instance, for creativity to unfold, I believe a loving presence among other participants as well as the director, is crucial. This is because improvisation involves play, and the process of playing requires that sort of presence that “places a field around the other, a field that holds the pure intention to protect, to care for, and to help.”⁴⁴ The same playing is required in processes of research, when trying and failing and trying again as part of the practice, and also the practices that are described here. Loving presence promotes trying and failing, because it is not judgemental. It involves reflection and discernment, but no final judgement.

⁴¹ Ibid., 12

⁴² Schechner 1993: 36-39.

⁴³ Roberts, Jude. 2003. *Te Arahia: A Pathway to Life*. s.l.: Kina Film Productions Ltd.

⁴⁴ Kurtz, Ron, in Morgan 2008a, 105.

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