



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Bayly, S. and Baraitser, Lisa (2008) On waiting for something to happen. *Subjectivity* 24 (1), pp. 340-355. ISSN 1755-6341.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/2178/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively

**Birkbeck ePrints: an open access repository of the  
research output of Birkbeck College**

<http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk>

---

Bayly, S. and Baraitser, L.  
**On waiting for something to happen**  
*Subjectivity* - 24(1), pp.340-355 (2008)

---

This is an exact copy of an article published in *Subjectivity*, (ISSN: 1755-6341) made available here with kind permission of: © 2009 Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved.

All articles available through Birkbeck ePrints are protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

Citation for this version:

Bayly, S. and Baraitser, L.  
**On waiting for something to happen**  
London: *Birkbeck ePrints*. Available at: <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/2178>

Citation for publisher's version:

Bayly, S. and Baraitser, L.  
**On waiting for something to happen**  
*Subjectivity* - 24(1), pp.340-355 (2008)

---

# On Waiting for Something to Happen

Simon Bayly and Lisa Baraitser

## Abstract

*This paper seeks to examine two particular and peculiar practices in which the mediation of apparently direct encounters is made explicit and is systematically theorized: that of the psychoanalytic dialogue with its inward focus and private secluded setting, and that of theatre and live performance, with its public focus. Both these practices are concerned with ways in which "live encounters" impact on their participants, and hence with the conditions under which, and the processes whereby, the coming-together of human subjects results in recognizable personal or social change. Through the rudimentary analysis of two anecdotes, we aim to think these encounters together in a way that explores what each borrows from the other, the psychoanalytic in the theatrical, the theatrical in the psychoanalytic, figuring each practice as differently committed to what we call the "publication of liveness". We argue that these "redundant" forms of human contact continue to provide respite from group acceptance of narcissistic failure in the post-democratic era through their offer of a practice of waiting.*

## Keywords

*psychoanalysis, performance, ethics, encounter, anecdote, waiting*

A collective acceptance of a failure to act is one of the dynamic elements that circulates in contemporary discussions of democracy, the "war on terror", and what is perceived as the currently precarious social and ecological bond. If there is an urgent ethico-political imperative to respond to and take responsibility for incalculable difference, there is also a concomitant lament at "our" collective failure to do so. From what will perhaps be the epoch-making embrace of capitalism by Chinese communism to the compromised compromises of Western European "third way" social democracies, there would appear to be a broad consensus that the project of the 20th century "Left" has profoundly failed, leaving no clear answer to the title question of Roberto Unger's recent book *What Should the Left Propose?* (Unger, 2006). While some argue for a renewed commitment to a humanism motivated by the forces of challenge and defiance and by the structures of the party, others glumly assent to the persistent reality of managed capitalism and point to micro-practices of marginal resistance as the requisite tactic, whether, for example, in terms of ludic forms of street protest or more sober non-profit initiatives in international micro-finance.

Our appeal here to the notion of a shared failure to act can be conceptualized in psychoanalytic terms as a group acceptance of a form of narcissistic failure. If narcissism is understood as a particular psychic tension between the reliance on the Other for recognition coupled with a form of enclosure around a subjective sense of nothingness, that is, a pervasive pattern of grandiosity coupled with the intense defensive work

required to ward off the psychic sequelae of rejection, then narcissistic failure describes this latter pole. As Robert Samuels has suggested in his analysis of the academy, in gatherings where there is a constellation of failed authority, disclaimed responsibility, embodied lack of interest and failed dialogue, the social itself becomes defined by group acceptance of narcissistic failure (Samuels, 2001). When the academy, for instance, accepts that it can only proceed by the production of speech for the sake of speech, repression of a fundamental emptiness at the core of the academy can be maintained, and the group accepts this narcissistic failure rather than attempts working through.

As is the case with intellectual fashion, the not-so-recent "ethical" turn in the humanities, symbolized by Jacques Derrida's redeployment of a Levinasian form of ethics, has itself been "turned" by a return to the political, and to material scenes of antagonism and disagreement, rather than to the more abstract ontological primacy of the infinitely demanding "other". However, as noted by Jacques Rancière, one of the more prominent philosophical figures in this retrenchment, the return to the political in philosophy occurs at the same moment as there is a retreat from "the multiplicity of modalities and places, from the street to the factory to the university" (Rancière, 1999, p. viii) in which the political has historically taken place. As the traditional spheres of political action retreat, so philosophy turns once again to formulating political action – or, more realistically, attempting to think about what kinds of formulations might be emergent or possible in a time that appears more philosophically characterized by waiting than by action.

While there are good reasons to critique the application of a broadly Levinasian position for rethinking ethics not only as "first philosophy" but as the foundation of any politics,<sup>1</sup> we suggest that there are perspectives that might usefully be retained from that position. Our suggestion in what follows is that moments of respite from the despair induced by group acceptance of narcissistic failure occur in the position Levinas describes as the "face-to-face", and hence have something to do with his particular conceptualization of the ethical. Explicit and implicit notions of the continuing significance of the "face-to-face" abound in various attempts to rethink how what Tom Nairn calls "the enabling detachment of kinship emotion from its original sources" (Nairn, 2007, p. 7) might assist in the development of collective forms of subjectivity that can reanimate hopes for broadly centre-left projects of social renewal. Envisioning the nature of social formations that will hopefully survive the current crisis of the biosphere, environmental historians William and J.R. McNeill suggest that only "face-to-face, primary communities" will be up to the task of long-range survival (McNeill and McNeill, 2003). Even the mathematical formalism of Badiou would appear to leave room for a similar understanding, given his recent re-articulation of the highly localized and intensive socio-political urban space of 1871 Paris Commune as the scene of the political event par excellence (Badiou, 2004).

In what follows, we take up the curious non-phenomenality of the phenomena of the Levinasian face-to-face through an expanded notion of "liveness". This is not to signal some unmediated, direct or "full" encounter in which people can finally see each other clearly, talk to each other with full speech, or engage in mutual recognition (though this would seem hardly to be problematic in itself), but rather, our aim is to attempt to

circumvent the ultra-humanism in determinations of the face-to-face, in which the face of the other as the face of the divine appears in an ontological desert, devoid any sort of material context or elemental and "object-oriented" environment. In doing so, we would acknowledge the under-appreciated significance of some of Levinas's earlier phenomenological formulations of the "il y a" (e.g, Levinas, 1978), the non-human background to being, such as his meditation on the night; work that receives its fullest articulation in the philosophy of Alphonso Lingis (Lingis, 2000), rather than in his own more well-known later works.

## Liveness

"Liveness" as a conceptual term is not one that is in widespread use. In fact, its most prevalent application is in information security, where liveness refers to the transmission of data that is happening in the present as opposed to a replay of a recording of data sent previously. Within computer communication, liveness is thus introduced into secure transmissions by mixing in a number that cannot be duplicated again. This idea of the authenticating power of an unreplicable intervention into a representational series links to another contemporary articulation of liveness, developed in an understanding of performance. This articulation is most explicit in Philip Auslander's *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (Auslander, 1999) whose basic premise is that the very notion of liveness as a badge of authenticity, presence and other fetishizations of the real or actual, only comes about at a particular cultural juncture produced by the widespread dissemination of technologies of representation. That is, liveness is in fact secondary to, and a by-product of, processes of mediatization brought about by the irrevocable complication of notions of presence that accompany the rapid succession of technologies, including but not limited to photography, television, digital imaging and networked computer communication. While the deconstructive move is to demonstrate how notions of presence have always already been complicated by forms of inscription (textual or otherwise), Auslander aims to show how such a deconstructive principle is specifically at work in various performances that are played out in and through mass media. His critique is explicitly aimed at earlier formulations of performance that sought to prioritize its immediacy, unrepeatability and refusal of commodification, themselves drawing on developments in live and performance art in Europe and the USA from the late 1950s. One of the most influential of these formulations is Peggy Phelan's psychoanalytically informed articulation of the ontology of performance, captured in a series of now iconic statements: "Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance" (Phelan, 1993, p. 146).

"Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies [...] [L]ive performance plunges into visibility – in a maniacally charged present – and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control. (p. 148)"

Auslander's critique of this requirement for the copresence of live bodies as the *sine qua non* for not only a definition but also an ethics of performance continues to receive widespread support from artists working with digital media as well as from critical theorists.<sup>2</sup> While the debate around the ontology of performance infuses the development of the self-styled non-discipline of performance studies, the performative paradigm has itself been disseminated widely among disciplines within and without established humanities subjects. As a consequence, a term like "presence" has, for many, rapidly acquired an excess of (mostly negative) ontological and epistemological baggage that recreates a problematic material/virtual dialectic.

Our invocation of "liveness" thus somewhat obtusely returns to, rather than bypasses, the scene of this dialectic. Notions like "presence" and the "face-to-face" continue to exert a powerful grip on thinking, the more so at a time when faith in the possibilities of mediatized communication has faltered in an era of rapid and entirely predictable corporatization of so-called "social networking" technologies, as well as the restricted conceptions of participation and engagement that inform many apparently "interactive", technology-driven artistic strategies. As a term, "liveness" brings with it other connotations; those of a heightened sense of being alive, of an animation of being, liveliness that is both contingent and vulnerable, or even of a Spinozan principle of life as affirmation, opposed to the stasis of the Freudian death drive. As if sensing that even these possibilities for "liveness" are too sutured to mediatization, in a discussion of "chatterbot" technology, Kevin Brown suggests that "we define 'performance' as 'the transmission of cultural content' (or 'liveness') and define 'theatre' as 'the transmission of cultural content through the medium of the body' (or 'liveness')" (Brown, 2006, p. 3). We will return to this distinction of a theatre of embodiment from a generalized conception of performance later. Here, we note that this reintroduction of the material/virtual divide, that others assert must be abolished in the name of an ethics of performance, illustrates a continuing desire to retain an ethics of embodied encounter that no amount of deconstructive critique appears to be able to overcome.

It is liveness (or liveness) as paradoxically that which emerges under the particularly constrained material and semiotic conditions provided by two live embodied encounters that we want to explore here – those of performance and the psychoanalytic clinical setting, situations whose conditions are designed to systematically make explicit and theorize the limits of liveness and liveness. Our question is: what are the material and semiotic conditions of performance and the clinical setting, that may give rise to an ethical encounter characterized by liveness, and that may provide instances that puncture the despair of narcissistic failure? And why bring together these two praxes, one with its private, secluded, intimate focus, and the other with its emphasis on the public gathering, the here-and-how of shared public space?

We work on this question through the analysis of two anecdotes drawn from the practices of psychotherapy and live art. This nascent methodology draws on Jane Gallop's conception of "anecdotal theory" (Gallop, 2002), a kind of writing that takes the recounting of an anecdote as its starting point. Rather than elaborate that here, it will hopefully suffice to say that it is a methodology that aims to use the empirical to explain

theory, in keeping with Deleuze's declaration that "the abstract does not explain, but must itself be explained" (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987, p. viii), but also aims to use theory to sober up anecdote. It is the way one might work when "stuck" with or on theory, an approach that focuses on some minor or overlooked incident to see what can be mined from it for insight or for simply a means to continue thinking. As such, it is a form of enquiry that obviously borrows a specifically psychoanalytic stance towards questions of knowledge and experience.

The two selected anecdotes describe occasions in which neither of us were fully present – although in one of them we are very much in the presence of living bodies, including our own. While this may seem opaque, it is necessarily so, since part of the argument here is that it is precisely when presence becomes opaque that liveness makes itself felt. For example, in a paper entitled *On the Couch*, Mignon Nixon describes an oral history project by the artist Silvia Kolbowski (Nixon, 2005). Sixty artists were chosen to select a conceptual work that was not their own, dating from 1965–1975, but which they had personally witnessed or experienced at the time. Kolbowski then interviewed the artists about the remembered work, videoing only their hands as they spoke and then re-presented the video and audio recordings in a gallery space, with the video and audio playing in adjoining rooms out of sync. "By asking artists to describe a work from memory, and in her presence, and by imposing a set of rules on the procedure, Kolbowski set up, loosely speaking, a psychoanalytic setting" (p.72). However, one contributor begins her session with Kolbowski by saying "I'm somewhat resisting your original request that it has to be something that I experienced" (p.72). Instead the artist recounts her experience of a piece of work she never saw. "I like telling people about it, because I like it a lot. But I don't think I actually saw it" (p.73). What is of interest here is the way that memories of events that one has not been present at nevertheless surface as significant memories, screen memories by definition, and therefore signifiers for the very subject of psychoanalysis as the subject of forgetting rather than remembering. A memory of something never witnessed, of something to which one cannot supply authentic testimony, simultaneously points towards the avoidance and the place of desire.

#### Anecdotes, psychoanalytic and performative

In a recent paper published in this journal, one of us describes a therapeutic session in which the author, in her role as therapist, to all intents and purposes begins to faint during a session (Baraitser and Frosh, 2007). She describes feeling hot, having palpitations, she breaks out in a sweat, her mind goes fuzzy and she literally begins to slide off her chair. This experience is formulated in terms of an extreme experience of projective identification, in which what is projected is something like "pure affect" – a primary affective state, a state of being in a state, a state that has no affective content as such, but itself signifies affect – the primary overwhelming of the infant, as Laplanche would have it, by the implantation of the other's otherness, which in turn gives rise to the infant's primary affective experience (Laplanche, 1998). It can also be thought of as an extreme experience of dissociation, one that parallels the patient's necessary defensive response to a traumatic incident that cannot yet be spoken of in the therapy.

We have been trying to think about whether this therapeutic encounter, the one in which the therapist begins to slide off her chair, constitutes what Alain Badiou would name as an event; that which arises from a situation of ordinary multiplicity and that is strictly indiscernible at the time, but retroactively turns out to be an event after the event by dint of our capacity to place a wager on it, to act in fidelity to it, to act as if it were true. After all, Badiou has indicated that psychoanalysis may offer a fifth condition for philosophy, after those of science, love, art and politics (Badiou, 1982). But it is not strictly psychoanalysis that is being practised in this particular encounter and it seems faintly absurd to elevate the status of such an example to that which is conferred by Badiou's own; the poems of Mallarmé, the advent of Cantorian set theory, the political drama of the Paris Commune, and so on. Yet, despite this, we are still intrigued by the possibilities of attempting to think about how truth might be understood as eventful in this situation, and what it may mean to stay truthful to this encounter in the moment that the therapist is collapsing.

During one of many coffee breaks while writing this paper, one of us asked the other if they could recall the pivotal point in their own psychotherapy – if there was a particular session, or group of sessions, a particular moment that could be named as the transitional point, when one could say, after Badiou and Joseph Heller, that "something happened", a point of no return. The other answered immediately, saying that there was just one session in which his therapist had said something, and the effect of "the said", (or is it "the saying"?) was described as an experience of having one's spine "plugged in". It felt weird – a term now undergoing its own weird academic rehabilitation – wired, alive, tingling. Of course, the actual words uttered have been forgotten. "I don't remember, it doesn't matter what they were", says the other, "it's logical that they disappear. I was there and also not there. It happened anyway, at least I think it happened, didn't it?" What is retained in this confusion of presence and happening, what in fact may be produced by this confusion, is "liveness", that experience of hearing as a jolt through the spine, leaving the mind connected to it feeling spacey and exhilarated. And so, as one of us tries to grapple with a literal near-collapse of herself as therapist, the other recounts the pivotal point as a patient who gets plugged in, woken up. As one tries to make sense of slipping off a chair, the other talks about words experienced like an electric shock, giving rise to a visceral sense of aliveness.

The second anecdote is a description of a performance neither of us attended. The performance is by a British-based performance and visual artist called Franko B. Known for cutting and blood-letting on stage, previous performances have included *I Miss You*, in which Franko performed an action painting with his own blood, walking down a canvas catwalk, creating a Pollock-like drip-design as he went, and another performance in which nine people fainted while he drew blood from his veins. We have never felt compelled to see his work, feeling some sympathy with the lone protestor who can occasionally be seen outside his performances, with a small sign reading "Stop this show now: self-harm is not art". (One of us has fainted at several other events, both live and mediated, involving self-administered blood-letting, there being only so much liveness that some bodies can take.) However, we were sobered to read a description of his work entitled *Aktion 398*, in which 20 audience members are invited into a waiting room, and

then allowed 2 minutes each to spend alone with Franko in a room. In an account of the performance, critic Emma Safe (Safe, 2002) describes entering the room, to find Franko naked, apart from his customary white body powder and a plastic bucket-hood collar that are put on animals to stop them licking their wounds. He is sitting with his back to her. There is no greeting or even acknowledgement of her presence. Not knowing what else to say, she addresses him with "Hello, Franko", at which point he turns to her, arms folded across a painful-looking wound. She asks him "does it hurt?" to which he replies "a little". Not knowing what else to do, she recites a poem and then leaves. Others she spoke to afterwards recounted feeling too scared to approach him, or wanting to touch the wound, shake his hand or talk about mundane things they had done during the day. One audience member stripped naked and pissed on the floor. They all found him kind, modest, polite, rational; he thanked Safe for the poetry, had tried to comfort those who were frightened, and had been generally attentive, had listened and responded to his audience members as best he could. She described how what mattered was "the intensity of the connection and communication between us [...] risking total humiliation and freeing himself so completely of all inhibitions, Franko had offered us the space to do the same – what we did with it was up to us" (Safe, 2002).

### Encountering ethics

What then do these two anecdotes have in common – the double therapeutic anecdote that explores both collapse and being plugged in, and the account of an experience of spending two minutes in a room with a naked, self-wounded man? And what can they tell us of ethics and of encounter, and of respite from group acceptance of narcissistic failure?

In a recent conference paper (Malone, 2005), Kareen Malone quotes Scott Savaiano who talks of "the encounter with a signifier that stuns, making heard [...] a signifier that reminds us that there is saying in [...] an almost 'totalizing' already said." Malone illuminates this in the following way: "When the subject hears a "stunning signifier," it is returned to the "starting point" or initial moment of a repetition of the same that the ego returns to when it encounters a perception signalling "danger" [...] the subject is stunned by significance.  
(Malone, 2005, p 6, italics in original)"

Her point is that this stunning repeats our castration by language – the oedipal moment of entry into the symbolic, "as we are taken aback to where and how we have been spoken. In bringing forth 'the saying' in the said, psychoanalytic work entails an ethics" (p.6).

The thrust of Lacan's account of the ethics of psychoanalysis is that both analyst and analysand must work in the realm of non-knowledge or "stupidity". While the aim or goal of a Lacanian analysis might be for the analysand to acknowledge the dimension of not-knowing on which every epistemic discourse is based, so the analyst's job is not to point out the analysand's misconceptions (this would align the analyst with the supposed subject of knowing, a position she must occupy but not inhabit), but to "fully expose the formations of the unconscious as headless pieces of knowledge, disruptive eruptions of meaninglessness against the comfortable backdrop of established reason" (Nobus and

Quinn, 2005, p. 4). When this occurs, it is not that the analysand experiences a profound sense of feeling heard, or a moment of insight, but rather this experience of being stunned. For how else are we to react to the realization that knowledge itself is organized around the gaps and fissures that animate it? How else to reckon with exposure to the irreducible obscurity within the demand to know? As truth punctures the domain of knowledge, we wake up, with a jolt to our spine. Stunning carries a double meaning here, signifying a sudden onset of incapacity, often experienced physically as a form of psychic abstinence (fainting), that is also an awakening to a sense of new psychic capacities and possibilities.

So, we are arguing that there are moments in a therapeutic encounter in which what is at stake is a quality of "liveness" that is brought on by the workings of the signifier that stuns, and that the liveness that this encounter gives rise to is what bends us towards ethics. It is the moment that the encounter becomes ethical because the analyst refuses the plea to remain in the plane of the imaginary, refuses, that is, to simply respond to the symptoms or demands of the patient, and through the effects of signification, insists on working in the plane of the symbolic, the plane of the analysts' desire.

But what of the other half of this anecdote, the sliding off the chair? At its simplest and perhaps most banal formulation, psychoanalysis is no more than two people talking in a room. It is an interaction in which "a psychoanalyst" is "anyone who uses what were originally Freud's concepts of the transference, the unconscious and the dream-work in paid conversations with people about how they want to live" (Phillips, 1995, p. xiv), with the proviso that this is a rather different and asymmetrical form of conversation experienced everyday. As Nixon describes it, the scene of psychoanalysis, that is, the unity of time and space of the psychoanalytic experience that includes the systematic use of these concepts, but also the transfer of money, the frequency and durations of the sessions, the material configuration and texture of the room, the chair, the couch, the furnishings, the physical placing of analyst and analysand in relation to these material objects, all make up what is referred to as the psychoanalytic frame (Nixon, 2005). Drawing on Laplanche, she highlights the tension between psychoanalysis as a process of dissolution, in which all formations (psychical, egoic, ideological and symptomatic) are dissolved, and the way that this process is made possible because psychoanalysis "offers the constancy of a presence, of a solitude, the flexible but attentive constancy of a frame...It is because the principle of constancy, of homeostasis, of Bindung is maintained at the periphery, that analysis is possible" (Laplanche, 1998, p. 227, quoted in Nixon, 2005). So this encounter that lasts for years, this discourse which founders at the point at which it becomes intercourse or conversation (both forms of mutuality that the psychoanalytic frame seeks to actively prevent), becomes itself an institution (that which is constant) paradoxically devoted to dissolution. The paradox is sustained only because this non-conversation is premised on the asymmetry that is the condition of the transference; one that is enacted not just in psychic space, but by the physical and social estrangement between these two people talking in this room. In the main, they do not touch, they do not change places, they do not come together. One reclines while the other is supposed to remain upright. No one is supposed to fall off his or her chair.

Much has now been written in the relational psychoanalytic literature about flexibility in the frame – the idea that this distance is almost impossible to maintain, that therapy actually proceeds through the analyst's surrender to the necessity of becoming involved in enactments and impasses that breach the frame, that can then be thought about, and worked through (Benjamin, 2004; Bass, 2007). Compromising a professional stance by sliding off a chair could be characterized in this way – when the impossible actually happens, this is the point that something is really going on for the patient. What cannot be thought is nevertheless protruding. For the patient to remain omnipotent, the other must collapse, and the doer-done-to dynamic can then be surfaced and worked on. What the therapist offers is a capacity to get in a state, and still come back to think about it with the client. The ethics of this encounter has been formulated by Jessica Benjamin as a capacity on the therapist's part for "surrender", for the analyst to change first (Benjamin, 2004).

In some ways these two differing accounts of the ethics of psychoanalysis seem at odds. However, what they share is the intimation of a dynamic of return. In one case the return is of a projection that first has to be either felt or enacted by the therapist before it is usefully taken back. In the other, the analysand is returned to the original moment of being spoken, with shock and surprise. Both take place in the "face-to-face" of the live therapeutic session. Ethics here is about not ducking out, but facing up to ones responsibilities to "bear liveness", responsibilities that apply to both analyst and analysand.

#### Aktion 398

And so to Franko and Aktion 398, whose very title indicates a peculiar intimation of a singular, anomalous incident that seems nevertheless to be part of an ever extending numbered series. While this performance may, in art historical terms, have more in common with traditions of body art that date back to both the 1960s as well as to religious iconographies of martyrdom and to other forms of ritual practice, in other terms it distills the essence of theatre in its staging of the encounter between audience and performer. Let us suppose, for the present purpose, that the theatre is not an art of representation, but the art of presentation: a place where what is made present – or fails to be made present – is the public as such, the very idea of the collective. To do so is to some extent to accept that the kinds of encounters orchestrated by theatrical performance offer the potential for the appearance of liveness as a rarefied form of liveness, one that cannot sacrifice the copresence of bodies as a guarantor of its ethical constitution. In doing so, we can contrast a pessimistically humanist notion of the theatre as a collective act for the community of those who have nothing in common, whose freedom consists literally in the fact that "the they" remain resolutely in their seats, their refusal to budge a kind of performance of non-performing, a participatory act of non-participation, with another contemporary trajectory that looks to a newfound relationality or sociality in contemporary art through a belated return to theatrical concerns.<sup>4</sup> In this understanding, the task for art in the post-democratic era is to make things public,<sup>5</sup> with all the connotations of that phrase, including a preference for a certain kind of transparency, the rejection of "tricky" mimetic or fictionalizing strategies and, above all, an oblique relation to art as a means for actually effecting any social or political transformation. As

Giorgio Agamben has it, if the artistic principle behind the preceding era was the transmission of intransmissibility, today the task of art is now the transmission of transmissibility (Agamben, 1999). This would not necessarily be the actualization of something shared or otherwise held in common, but simply the suggestion of the fact that such a thing is possible: it might happen, might it not, this desire for collective transformational gathering?

Aktion 398 works compellingly with both the possibility for collective transformational gathering and its failure precisely by summoning an audience to a public gathering that has no performance (the waiting room) and then siphoning off the members of this audience from each other by inviting them into a space in which what is performed is only the face-to-face itself, the exposure of one to the literal suffering of the other. The wound in Franko's side echoes that of Christ, placing a spectator in the position a doubting Thomas, whose desire to get as close as possible to Christ, to touch the cut (as figured in the famous painting by Caravaggio) serves, among other things, to paradoxically symbolize his separation from the other disciples, his breaking of the faith of, and in, the collective. Aktion 398 generates an ethical space par excellence, not because we are asked to act on his behalf – bind his wound, take responsibility for him, care for him, witness him (and "we" here once again occludes the strange fact of "our" non-presence at this encounter, by which we are apparently authorized to speak about it), but because his address calls us into being as ethical subjects to the extent that we must contend with how to traverse the space between self and other, and in doing so are ultimately returned to our own desire. After all, anything and nothing can happen. It really is up to us. And at the same time, through the formality of the frame – the waiting room, the appointed time, the limited duration of contact, the emptiness of the space – we are returned to the world, or rather, we are returned to how the public is made present in what only superficially appears as private or intimate. By framing itself as a "private" performance, Aktion 398 reveals the profoundly public dimension of its situation. By presenting himself visually to the spectator in a theatricalized appearance of self-abjection (alone, naked, bleeding, quarantined from himself with the flea collar) yet offering himself as an interlocutor profoundly committed to rational exchange, listening with an absence of histrionics, Franko registers his own particular form of jouissance while remaining firmly wedded to his own participation in the shared symbolic of a discourse of reserve, politeness and calm. In this setting, these qualities take on an ethic of "ordinary" care and responsibility that can seem more like indifference when compared with Levinasian notions of oneself as a "hostage" to the Other (Levinas, 1974) and the notion of even taking responsibility for one's own persecution by the otherness of this Other.

If, as Laplanche suggests, "psychoanalysis [...] leads to the dissolution of all formations – psychological, egoic, ideological, symptomatic" (Laplanche, 1998, p. 227), then this is not a dissolution for its own sake – as if all forms of closure or subjectivization were ethically and politically problematic – but rather the idiosyncratic reassemblage of the subject with the signifying chain, with "what speaks in me", and also with the world of others. As Mignon Nixon has explored (Nixon, 2005), it is the formal and privative frame of the analytic scene that plays a significant part in this processes. It is the repeated exits and

entrances, the props, costumes and furnishings of the analytic stage that so often provide "material" for analysis itself. In addition, key elements that symbolize the value of the exchange, time and money, will both have to be found for an encounter that appears to guarantee only that it cannot guarantee anything. In entering the frame and literally stepping out of the social in order to re-organise one's relationship to it, one becomes, like Franko, an anomalous singleton, in the grip of an histrionic anxiety that seems to have made life unliveable, and yet committed to a type of verbal discourse (free association) that "speaks me", and which seems an unlikely means to turn the unliveable into liveness via some anticipated but unplannable event of liveness.

In a Lacanian understanding, this unplannable event would be the limit of possibility for the subject: only individuals can be treated on the couch. Jouissance is not something that can be had equally by all. Yet, as Sam Gillespie suggests in his claim for a Lacanian appreciation of affect as necessary to a Badiouian concept of truth and event, the production of aesthetic objects and experiences "that instantiate the empty ground of being that is annulled in and through the advent of language" may function as a form of sublimation that generates "a generic, higher faculty of jouissance" (Gillespie, 2006, p. 183). That part of the subject that exceeds its own activity, we are here crudely labelling with the word "public" and to which this higher faculty would belong. Furthermore, we are suggesting that this "public-ness" is bound up with experiences of "liveness" in which one is neither returned to oneself nor dissolved, but rather given over to participation in the generic. This is not to say that the subject is returned to a community of any kind, but that in these encounters, the face-to-face (which is never literally face-to-face, as the frame of the couch in psychoanalysis dictates) produces experiences of "something happening", that – thankfully – gets in the way of the simply "interpersonal" via the effects and affects of signification as they are staged in the analytic scene. The "stunning signifier" produces a separation, rather than togetherness, mutuality or recognition, but a separation that paradoxically binds me to that from which I was previously held in an anxious non-relation.

Redundant contact, practising waiting

We end by suggesting that we might usefully think of both psychoanalysis and particular inflections of performance exemplified by Aktion 398, as "redundant" forms of human contact, deliberately "useless" and "stupid" forms that nevertheless continue to stage the possibility for something to happen. The anecdotes described earlier and our rudimentary analysis aim to think these phenomena together in a way that explores what each borrows from the other, the psychoanalytic in the theatrical, the theatrical in the psychoanalytic, figuring each practice as differently committed to the "publication" of "liveness".

Both Aktion 398 in particular and the theatre in general, as well as the analytic hour, share a frame that requires waiting and the provision of room for waiting – even if that room is, as in some practices of psychotherapy, the street. And just as one can wait for some time in analysis for something to be said or to be able to say anything, it is perhaps also possible to consider the audience with Franko in Aktion 398 as simply a form of waiting that does or does not require to be "filled out" or otherwise avoided by the

spectator. Franko waits for us, and we go in to wait with him, waiting for something to happen in the two minutes available for our meeting. Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk claims that the conditions under which democracy might emerge in the present moment of political impasse with which we started this paper are "an effect of a 'waiting power' – meaning the ability to wait and to let others wait". He then adds enigmatically "democracy is based on the proto-architectonic ability to build waiting rooms" (Sloterdijk, 2005, p. 944). In a world in which many of us sit stupefied rather than stunned in front of televised wars, sign on-line petitions in some vague gesture towards collective action, or work hard theoretically to champion localized and diverse forms of resistance as effective responses to the consolidation of global power, these redundant forms of human contact continue to provide respite through their offer of a practice of waiting. These practices hold a potential for liveness, thought of as the traversal of ethical space, albeit one in which, as a memory of something we have perhaps never experienced, has to still contend with our continued avoidance of desire.

## Notes

1 This is most sympathetically but no less aggressively put forward by Alain Badiou in his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (Badiou, 2001).

2 See, for example, Chvasta (2005) and Fenske (2005).

3 This term is being used here in the Kleinian sense, in which unwanted aspects of the self are inserted into an external object both for protection and as an act of aggression, and then identified with in order to sustain phantasies of control of the object by the self, or vice versa (Frosh, 2002).

4 Key texts in this respect would include Bourriaud (2002), Kester (2004) and Latour and Weibel (2005).

5 We take this phrase from the title of Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel's edited catalogue and exhibition of 2005, cited above.

## References

1. Agamben, G. (1999). *The Man Without Content*. Georgia. Albert (trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
2. Auslander, P. (1999). *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
3. Badiou, A. (1982). *Théorie du sujet*. Paris: Seuil.
4. Badiou, A. (2001). *Ethics: an Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Peter Hallward (trans.). London and New York: Verso.
5. Badiou, A. (2004). *Theoretical Writings*. In Albert Toscano and Ray Brassier (eds.) London: Continuum.
6. Baraitser, L. and Frosh, S. (2007). *Affect and Encounter in Psychoanalysis*. *Critical Psychology* 21, pp. 76–93.

7. Bass, A. (2007). When the Frame Doesn't Fit the Picture. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 17(1), pp. 1–27. | Article |
8. Benjamin, J. (2004). Beyond Doer and Done To: An Intersubjective View of Thirdness. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* LXXIII, pp. 5–46.
9. Bourriaud, N. (2002). *Relational Aesthetics*. S. Pleasance and F. Woods (trans.). Paris: Les Presses Du Réel.
10. Brown, K. (2006). Auslander's Robot. *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 2(1), pp. 3–21. | Article |
11. Chvasta, M. (2005). Remembering Praxis: Performance in the Digital Age. *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25(2), pp. 156–170. | Article |
12. Deleuze, G. and Parnet, C. (1987). *Dialogues*. New York: Columbia University Press.
13. Fenske, M. (2005). The Aesthetic of the Unfinished: Ethics and Performance. *Text and Performance Quarterly* 24, pp. 1–19. | Article |
14. Frosh, S. (2002). *Key Concepts in Psychoanalysis*. London: British Library.
15. Gallop, J. (2002). *Anecdotal Theory*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
16. Gillespie, S. (2006). Giving form to its Own Existence: Anxiety and the Subject of Truth. *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 2(1–2), pp. 161–185 [WWW document]. <http://www.cosmosandhistory.org/index.php/journal/issue/view/9> (accessed 22 April 2008).
17. Kester, G. (2004). *Conversation Pieces: Community and Conversation in Modern Art*. San Francisco, CA: University of California Press.
18. Laplanche, J. (1998). *Essays on Otherness*. John Fletcher (trans.). London and New York: Routledge.
19. Latour, B. and Weibel, P. (eds) (2005). *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
20. Levinas, E. (1974). *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*. Alphonso Lingis (trans.), 1998 paperback edition. Pittsburgh: Dusquesne University Press.
21. Levinas, E. (1978). *Existence and Existents*. Alphonso Lingis (trans.). The Hague: Nijhoff.
22. Lingis, A. (2000). *Dangerous Emotions*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
23. Malone, K. (2005). *Erasing the Impossible Professions: The State and Psychoanalysis*. Unpublished conference paper, International Society for Theoretical Psychology Conference, Cape Town, 2005.
24. McNeill, W. and McNeill, J.R. (2003). *The Human Web: A Bird's Eye View of History*. New York: W.W.Norton & Co.
25. Nairn, T. (2007). The Enabling Boundary. *London Review of Books* 29(20), pp. 5–7.
26. Nixon, M. (2005). On the Couch. *October* 113, pp. 39–76. | Article |
27. Nobus, D. and Quinn, M. (2005). *Knowing Nothing, Staying Stupid: Elements for a Psychoanalytic Epistemology*. London and New York: Routledge.
28. Phelan, P. (1993). *Unmarked: A Politics of Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.
29. Phillips, A. (1995). *Terrors and Experts*. London: Faber and Faber.

30. Rancière, J. (1999). *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy*. J. Rose (trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
31. Safe, E. (2002). Come into My Parlour. *The Guardian*, 25 May 2002.
32. Samuels, R. (2001). An Academic is Being Beaten: A Psychoanalytic Discussion of Higher Education. *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 6(2), pp. 167–171.
33. Sloterdijk, P. (2005). Atmospheric Politics, in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
34. Unger, R. (2006). *What Should the Left Propose?* London: Verso.