

What is a Theatre of Passionate Interests?

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Summary

For centuries, humans have used theatre practice as a way to investigate and re-compose life, in both imagined and real ways. In all matters of public activity, concerned groups can use the skills of theatre and performance to better represent their passionate interests.

With special attention given to the work of Bruno Latour, actor-network theory and pragmatist philosophy, this essay explores the radically empirical ways that theatre artists can put their skills to use in the composition of a common world.

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Between a Theater and Laboratory

I think before the body is put into the brine bath, a drawing should be made of it. Shall we not allow posterity to share our exhilaration at the sight of such a perfect physical beauty? I should be very much obliged if you yourself would perpetuate on paper the loveliness of this poor clay, Mr. Murray. We know your skill with the pencil. God should have made you an artist. He did the next best thing: he gave you a very vivid imagination.

– Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils*¹

These are the spiteful words spoken by the anatomist, Dr. Rock, to his younger colleague after rebuffing the subordinate's accusation that he has indirectly caused the murder of the well-known prostitute, Jenny Bailey, lying on the slab before them. Between 1827 and 1828, the Irish laborers William Burke and William Hare killed seventeen people in Edinburgh, Scotland, and sold their victims to an anatomy school located at the epicenter of the city's burgeoning medical industry. Within hours of their capture, Burke and Hare became the poster children for a large public controversy over the growing need for human bodies in the medical sciences. Countless broadsides, ballads, children's rhymes and plays (including the screenplay quoted above) have dramatized the case, and the use of human bodies for scientific and educational purposes is still open to debate.²

The real anatomist of the Burke and Hare case was Robert Knox, a prominent Scottish anatomist/surgeon/zoologist known for his satirical wit, disdain for religion, and a distinctly racist view of anthropology. Dylan Thomas didn't have to invent much to parody Knox as a cold man of science. However, in his fictional colleague, Mr. Murray, the one that God 'should have made an artist,' Thomas creates a foil in which to bring out more of the ambiguities of scientific life.

¹ From the screenplay. Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils* (New York: Time Life Books, 1964): 89.

² One need only look at the highly profitable Body Worlds touring exhibit of German anatomist Gunther von Hagens and the myriad disputes surrounding his plastinated human cadavers.

Two scenes after Dr. Rock's rebuke, we find Murray sitting before the body of young Jenny Bailey, drawing her in the dim light of the dissecting room. It's a scene made poignant because one learns earlier that she was his lover. But what happens in the stage directions makes this moment far more compelling than the melodrama at its surface:

Now Murray is drawing the clenched hand of the hanging arm.
And from the picture we TRACK UP towards the real hand.
And suddenly the hand unclenches itself: an after-death jerk of
the nerves.
And two pennies fall out of the now open hand, and drop onto
the floor. We see them roll along the floor (Thomas, 90).

Cue the close-up of the coins coming to rest at the feet of the corpse's lover, I mean the woman's lover. Which is it? Warm lover? Cold object? Who are the actors in this scene anyway? And what is happening to the *representation of things* when a screenplay depicts a depiction of an indifferent object that suddenly overtakes its own representation-in-making with a jerk of *action*? This is what compelled me in 2004 to take up this over-used, over-dramatized historical crime as a topic for investigation. An interrogation of that cadaver's reflex, and my reflection on it, was in order. To do that I would have to *re-present* all the actors in this morbid story by summoning them back to that dark and miserable anatomical theater.

The Resurrectory was a research laboratory disguised as a theatre disguised as an inquest.³ I created it with Liminal, the performance ensemble that I co-founded in Portland, Oregon, as a way to investigate the controversies surrounding the Burke and Hare case, and to trace networks of human body trafficking into the present day. We set up shop in a large art gallery and divided the space into four zones of simultaneous empirical activity. The first was an operating theatre. In it, an anatomist sang a lecture accompanied by a quartet of musicians. During his lecture, a 'real' cadaver shrouded in linen became the projection surface for a three-dimensional video that aesthetically depicted the scientific and metaphysical processes of death and decomposition on the body's form.

In a second space, a stage was built for reenacting the Burke and Hare murders based on the testimonies found in court transcripts from their trial. Actors interpreted, performed and re-performed the precise

³ Liminal, *The Resurrectory*, dir. Bryan Markovitz, 2005,
<http://www.bryanmarkovitz.com/liminal/the-resurrectory>

physical actions of the killers and their victims. In a third space, an anatomist's assistant tended to the victims' bodies between repeating cycles of life and death. Finally, in a fourth space, a public archive was kept to document physical evidence, photographs and data captured during the reenactments.

For three weeks, research staff at the Resurrectory studied, rehearsed, and reenacted the Burke and Hare case, as well as its connections to other events in the history of anatomical science and the social aspects of death. Resurrectory staff also produced hundreds of objects (reliquaries, weapons, tools, records, etc.) that were needed to reconstruct history. The Resurrectory had docents who guided public tours and helped visitors discover and discuss what was happening around them.

Why did we choose to make something so theatrical, yet so resistant to a single representation of a story? Why not just produce our version of *The Doctor and the Devils*? The story alone isn't interesting enough to stage. Rather, it is the way that this particularly controversial event in history interrogates the production of meaning and the practice of assembly that I found so compelling. The Resurrectory was a wholly theatrical experience, but, like all good theatre, it did much more than suspend its visitors in a new reality. It acted on the reflexive qualities of experience, and examined the many distinctions that its characters made between what was open or closed to discussion. Some things were granted the full power to speak, while others were denied it completely. Sometimes, as in the case of the cadaver's reflex, agency came from unexpected places. There were many more trials going on than just the one about Burke and Hare. This is why we needed to expand our definition of theatre, redesign the site of artistic investigation and re-circulate the bodies of our inquiry. We needed to be there together, sharing the same air, diffusing the difference between observer and observed.

In the Burke and Hare legend, we find a launching point for this essay, and some answers to the question of how to bring theatre back into the political life of communities.

A World of Passionate Interests

Look at how the flames dance, where they go, from whence they come, toward what emptiness they head, how they become fragmented and then join together or die out. Both fluctuating and dancing, this sheet of flames traces relations.

– Michel Serres⁴

The sociologist Gabriel Tarde originally used the phrase ‘passionate interests’ to define irrational behaviors that affect political economies.⁵ It also serves the way that I want to talk about theatre in its most social, most political sense. Show me a controversy, and I’ll show you a theatre of passionate interests. From the texture of our clothes, to the sound of our voices, to the gestures and mingling of our bodies, we are constantly performing. We invent technologies to make our interests stronger, and we prosecute or defend them in the trials we conduct. We solidify their power by constructing scientific knowledge, and reshape them through the imaginative speculations of philosophy. We interpret them in narratives, and preserve them through our religions. As we perform, so do others, humans and non-humans alike, and our colliding interests are the energized source of all creation. To exist is to differ, says Tarde, and when we encounter difference, we respond by inventing new kinds of experience to support life.⁶

The radically empirical skills of theatre have an important role to play in shaping passionate interests. At a time of immense ecological and political distress, I propose that theatre artists need to contribute their vital skills to the creation of new experiences for public debate and collective invention. In combination with other experimental disciplines, I believe that theatre could help solve problems where the most democratic forms of political assembly, and the most disciplined forms of scientific investigation currently fail.

⁴ Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

⁵ “[T]here is not a single aspect of social life in which one does not see passion grow and unfold together with intelligence...” See Bruno Latour and Vincent Antonin Lépinay, *The Science of Passionate Interests: An Introduction to Gabriel Tarde’s Economic Anthropology*, Vol. 37 (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press): 23-24.

⁶ Difference is an activity made in equal parts from rhythm and strife. The oscillation stimulates adaptations that sustain life. See Gabriele Tarde, *Social Laws: An Outline of Sociology*, trans. Howard C. Warren (New York: Macmillan, 1899).

In the theatre, we act precisely because we don't know what must be done. We act in order to compose and re-compose. We rehearse to debate the quality of the experience that we want to express. To find truth, we compose it through direct experience. In this sense, theatre is the act of composition *par excellence*, and I believe that it must participate in more direct, flexible, pluralistic and inventive ways within public spaces of political assembly. What is a theatre of passionate interests? It represents my desire to put performance on equal ground with other empirical disciplines, particularly the sciences.⁷

Let's consider the idea of a theatre of passionate interests from the perspective of the most famous character in Western theatre – our beloved Hamlet. He sits there, hunched and brooding in a dusty enclave of Elsinore, trapped in the prison of his mind. His friends and enemies swarm at him from every direction, yet the young Prince of Denmark is loathe to tangle himself up in any of their petty concerns. Would it not be preferable, he ponders, to depart from this world of endless suffering? Such is the dilemma of theatre's most beloved Cartesian Dualist. Only two opposing choices exist – to die and emancipate himself from his cursed life, or to live bound by the injustices that others have caused.

Imagine what might be possible if Hamlet could add just a few more options to the list! How quickly he could erase the useless binary he has made between thought and action, cause and effect. If he would only cast off his fear and take up a new spirit of engagement, there might be some hope. *To have or not to have?* That's a very different kind of question.⁸ It leads to all kinds of other prepositional questions such as "With whom can I work?" and, "How can we live together?" and, "Where do we go from here?" By asking any of them, and accepting his attachments as opportunities, Hamlet could get on with the politics of his court and the life of his community. Unfortunately for Hamlet (and good for lovers of Shakespearean drama), his fate is sealed. He follows a path of destruction that leaves the composition of the future to those that enter the stage after his death. Must we also leave the floor of our castles covered in blood for

⁷ It is interesting to note John Shanahan's proposition that theatre played an important part in the development of early modern scientific practice, particularly in the creation of proto-scientific solutions for manipulating material and using it to narrate truths about the world, see "Ben Johnson's *Alchemist* and Early Modern Laboratory Space," *The Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* (Indiana University Press) 8, no. 1 (2008): 35-66.

⁸ A revision of Shakespeare first proposed by Bruno Latour in his 2009 lecture at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. See Bruno Latour, "Spheres and Networks: Two Ways to Reinterpret Globalization," *Harvard Design Magazine* (Harvard University Press), no. 30 (2009): 140.

someone else to clean up, or can Hamlet's grim condition serve as an object lesson for us before its too late?

To act on our passionate interests is to shape the social world around us in unpredictable ways.⁹ Examples of the kinds of strange compositions that competing interests have made are everywhere. Melting glaciers are connected in a chain of relations to financial markets, which are vulnerable to the actions of a single computer hacker in Chengdu, or an entrenched regime in Bahrain. We have changed the world through techno-scientific innovation, and the world is changing us. This is why the anthropologist Bruno Latour says that we live in a time when we must redesign everything that matters to our physical survival, from our environment, to our hyper-extended economies, to our most gridlocked sites of political assembly.¹⁰ Our survival depends on our ability to innovate and create life-sustaining experience, but we must also be smarter about the way our innovations perform. In short, we need to learn how to manage our mastery of the world, and the only way we can do this is by acting on our beliefs, and experimenting with our actions repeatedly to perfect experience.¹¹

Making Theatre More Public

As the theatre dies, it is being protected by a clique of people who are narrowing it back to the writer. And because we don't work that way, we trespass everywhere. We plagiarize. We steal. We are outlaws.

– Elizabeth LeCompte¹²

I know where Elizabeth LeCompte is coming from. It often does feel like theatre is on its deathbed, and there is something to her concern for its dependency on the literary score. Theatre's great strength is its ability to utilize all forms of expression in enacted ways. Theatre practice teaches us how to rehearse and re-rehearse, to model experience and invent futures by acting them out as highly precise social experiments. When it comes to innovation, theatre is as inventive as any technical or scientific

⁹ See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ See Bruno Latour, "A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)," in *Networks of Design* (Cornwall: Design History Society at University College, Falmouth, 2008).

¹¹ See Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004): 250.

¹² David Savran, *Breaking the Rules* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988): 92.

discipline. It is a practice that is radical enough to try out any action imaginable, but cautious enough to be sensitive to the subtle changes and consequences of action. In theatre, invention is a relational process that evolves through a series of experimental adaptations and the cultivation of interested participants.¹³

Theatre is also an experience that intensifies events, while simultaneously pointing to a world beyond the performance. The philosopher Alfred Whitehead notes that, “events are lived through, they extend around us. They are the medium within which our physical experience develops, or, rather, they are themselves the development of that experience.”¹⁴ Drama has the power to propel participants beyond the performance toward unimagined experience and extended frontiers of reality that can form the basis for change in real life.

The proliferation of practices that I describe cannot happen solely within known forms of art and performance. They will have to happen among artists who are willing to pack up their most useful creative tools, part with institutions and traditions for a time, and venture to take up new collaborations with people from other disciplines. Their collaborations will require compromises. Methods will have to change in ways that seem impossible at first, but that ultimately strengthen creative abilities.

These actions will not be revolutionary. Nothing needs to be burned down, nor will anyone be assailed for returning to the institutions of art from time to time. Eventually, they too might take on more compositional agendas. This is already a major curatorial mission in some contemporary arts museums, though it is going to take longer among theatre institutions. Theatre practice is slower to adapt its traditions, and sensibly so. One’s impulse in rehearsal is to slow down, refer back to the text, consider the reception of your audience, and perfect the precise expressions of actors as they perform. Theatre turns our attention to the fragile connections, emotions, affects, risks and reparations of life. Theatre offers something that our goal-driven world needs more of to stay in balance –creative and adaptive ways of unfolding

¹³ For more on innovation, see Madeleine Akrich, Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, “The Key to Success in Innovation Part I: The Art of Intersement” and “The Key to Success in Innovation Part II: The Art of Choosing Good Spokespersons,” ed. Adrian Monaghan, *International Journal of Innovation Management* (Imperial College Press) 6, no. 2 (2002): 187-225.

¹⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge* (Cambridge: University Press, 1955). Also see Whitehead’s *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978).

experience.¹⁵ A theatre of passionate interests could provide an antidote to the reproduction of everyday events that disconnect people from the propensity of life.¹⁶ Highly designed and predictable experiences are becoming more frequent in consumer culture, yet they do little help us negotiate the passionate interests that challenge us at every turn.

What challenges face us? Look at today's newspaper and you will find more controversies than even Shakespeare could imagine. Consider the scientifically mastered, guaranteed safe, and essential site of production that was once called Deepwater Horizon; or perhaps the precisely engineered Fukushima Nuclear Plant. Scientists rendered these sites a stable resource for millions of people. But as we all know, our greatest innovations can collapse, leaving fractured arteries to spew crude oil from Louisiana to Florida, or billowing clouds of radioactive particles to settle across fertile Japanese farmland. These are just a few examples of how the stable objects of modern life can rapidly fill the world with plumes of unstable disaster. How can we re-trace all of the entities that composed Deepwater Horizon or Fukushima Daichi? Through which democratic process will their passionate interests be represented? Is representation even possible to extend to so many entities, or must we find other ways to negotiate the conflicts of humans and their creations (Latour, 2004)? These are questions that we must consider when we compose for a theatre of passionate interests, and many observant artists have already begun.

In 2008, the artist Paul Chan added to the rebuilding of New Orleans communities ravaged by Hurricane Katrina by staging free performances of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in the Ninth Ward and Gentilly neighborhoods.¹⁷ Not unlike Susan Sontag's 1993 production of *Waiting for Godot* in war besieged Sarajevo, Chan created a theatre of passionate interests that intervened in ways that no news reporter, levy engineering team or federal investigation ever could. Chan's theatre was an experience that included a two-hour performance, but also extended

¹⁵ See Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 220-254. Also, Nigel Thrift, "Pass it on: Towards a political economy of propensity," *Emotion, Space and Society* (Elsevier Ltd.) 1 (2009): 83-96.

¹⁶ Compare Joseph Pine and James Gilmore's, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 1999) to Lauren Berlant's, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* (University of Chicago Press) 33 (2007): 754-780. The business world regularly uses performance practices to reproduce and spread predictable experiences that do little to activate our creative abilities to compose the future.

¹⁷ Paul Chan, ed., *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide*, ed. Paul Chan (New York: Creative Time, 2010).

itself as a creative process that helped people gather for discussion and action. Chan and his partners organized potlucks and meetings, theatre workshops for children, conversations between artists and residents, and a public fund that would help residents re-build their community. Their work expanded theatre's reach to function not only as art, but as a social convener, a conversation starter, and a fully active participant in the community.

Of course, what I have described so far leads to many questions. How can a theatre of passionate interests engage with other experimental disciplines? What is the relationship between audience and performer in this kind of theatre? What kinds of spaces and time will this work require? How will we gather the resources needed to make it possible? I don't have all the answers, which is part of my point. We must each create theatres that meet the needs of distinct participants at specific places and times. To begin to approach theatre as a social practice, rather than a form of art, I want to take a moment to look at some aspects of a methodology called actor-network theory (ANT), that I think might be of interest.

Despite its nomenclature, actor-network theory does not come from theatre practice. ANT is not an artistic discipline, but it is an empirical one. ANT is a method from the social sciences that offers specific approaches for assembling accounts of the social world. Its strategies are drawn from a variety of ethnographic, scientific and philosophical disciplines that are all focused on the importance of research and observation to describe experience. It was created in the 1980s by a group of scholars, including Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law, who sought a better way to describe how scientific facts are assembled by scientists in laboratories when they manipulate vast networks of entities and passionate interests, including everything from students, lab mice, and computer programs, to formulas, measurement devices, and grant proposals.¹⁸

Actor-network theory's most frequent champion is Latour. He wrote a definitive introductory text on the practice titled *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Latour, 2005). His description of ANT is founded in his philosophical understanding of the irreducibility of the sciences, and in his anthropological study of the Modern era. Latour's philosophy is grounded in Alfred Whitehead's protest of the bifurcation of nature (Whitehead 1978, 289). Bifurcation is the deliberate separation of all experience between two poles: the natural world of material objects on one side, and the social world of human

¹⁸ John Law and John Hassard, *Actor-Network Theory and After* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

ideas on the other. From the Copernican Revolution until now (Latour's 'Modern Parenthesis'), philosophers, educators, scientists, journalists, critics, politicians and artists of all kinds have acted on the belief that things in nature are given as facts whether we like it or not, but that humans alone have the intellectual power to alter things in nature to suit their will. This is the defining feature of Latour's Modern Constitution, which politically enforces the epistemological rupture between nature and society. What makes Latour's definition of the Modern provocative and radical, is his assertion that we have never been Modern.¹⁹

Why divide the world into natural and social camps? The answer to Latour is simple – it allows humans to speed up, to modernize the world faster, to engineer existence and reap the rewards while denying the strange new networks that take shape – networks that are not entirely human, and not entirely natural. "Nature is not natural," Gertrude Stein once wrote, "and that is natural enough."²⁰ Latour couldn't agree more. "To be modern," Latour says, "is to make an absolute separation between the collectivity and things, a separation that estranges us from mythology, from the past, from other cultures – a separation that sets us apart." (Serres and Latour 1995, 146). Latour brings his amodern agenda to actor-network theory. He upholds ANT as a very imperfect, but useful way to dispense with the nature-society divide. In an actor-network, all of experience is described through relations that cannot be predicted before they happen, or attributed to a universal construction. It is only after the event occurs that we can attempt to interpret it. Latour also uses actor-network theory to shift concern away from the proof of 'matters of fact', and toward the description of 'matters of concern' (which I equivocate with passionate interests).²¹

Here's the thing about ANT that tends to really upset people. ANT doesn't give humans any exceptional role in the creation of experience. Actor-network theory refers to an 'actor' as *anything* that does something to other actors, or to which activity is granted by other actors. The term implies no special motivation for human actors. ANT asserts that all

¹⁹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

²⁰ Gertrude Stein, *Ida* (New York: Vintage, 1972).

²¹ According to Latour, facts are indisputable elements of sensation used by people to defend their passionate interests. Facts become more usefully described as concerns when their entire set of relationships is accounted for, including the actors who created them, and the conditions in which they were manufactured that made them indisputable. See Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* (University of Chicago Press) 30 (2004): 225-248.

kinds of actors make a difference in the world, and that they transmit agency regardless of intentionality. When a subway door crushes your fingers, its action has changed you. It's true that the train conductor, the designer of the doors, the placement of your body, and a million other factors also contributed to the making of your injury. All of them *acted* through the door that crushed your swollen fingers.

Latour says that it is never clear who or what is acting, because an actor is never alone. Actors are never the stable source of a condition, but transmitters of changing propositions. When we focus on any particular one of them, we are actually focusing on a node of their movement, or an event that is unfolding.²² In ANT terms, a network is not a static web of material connections. Rather, it is the fluid movement of connected actions. To describe a network, one must describe the qualities of actions as they move from actor to actor. Within networks, we can describe the unexpected things that actors do to other actors.²³ Now do you see why all this talk of ants has something to do with a theatre of passionate interests? It offers us a way to think of theatre as a daily practice for observing the social world and gives us a few new techniques for our work.

Theatre in Daily Practice

In the last century, Antonin Artaud called for a theatre that would fully activate the qualities of experience. Bertolt Brecht designed a theatre for reflexive observation. When we draw from the best of their distinct visions, as well as others, we begin to assemble the methods of a theatre of passionate interests. Let's return to the question that I previously asked: How can a theatre of passionate interests help others participate in the public composition of experience? By framing our work in terms of daily practice through observation and experimentation of actor-networks, we can apply theatre to cross-disciplinary compositions. Theatrical methods become tools for testing the efficacy of an experience, particularly when re-enacting experience from the past and when inventing experience for the future. As the poet Lyn Hejinian once said, "Form is not a fixture. It's

²² Whitehead's *Process and Reality* offers an extensive analysis of the event and its parts. For a short interpretation of Whitehead's description of an event, see "What is an Event?" in Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold* (London: The Athlone Press, 1993): 76-84.

²³ Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications," *STOT Resources/ANT Resource* (Center for Social Theory and Technology, Keele University), 1997.

an activity.”²⁴ With this in mind, here are some provisional recommendations for inventing your own theatre of passionate interests:

1. Repurpose your theatre skills in new forms of composition. More rapidly than ever, artists are recomposing their disciplines and rapidly changing what it means to make art. We live in a time when it is impossible to separate the art object or the artistic experience from the rest of reality and daily life. This turn has made it possible for more people to make art in more ways. Some are familiar and some are new. Artists fill studios with objects, recordings, data and field notes of all kinds. They stumble around in rehearsals and perform all sorts of physical trials. They make silent actors speak and invent new ways to compose space and time. They know how to assemble experience through the most basic and vulgar repertoire of exercises, and they know how to create the most sophisticated affective experiences and sensations. The next step for artists is to recompose their disciplines again, but this time in concert with non-artists in other fields of expertise. Together, these new groups could recompose their disciplines into better forms of practice that meet the needs of our time.

Theatre could be an important part of these new experiments because it offers people essential skills for learning how to compose in collaboration with others. Theatre oscillates between the one and the many, and it sets up a distinct quality of reflexivity for the performers and the audience. “The interest for the spectator lay not in the novelty of the story,” writes Victor Turner, “but in seeing how the dramatist has chosen to deal with it, and no doubt in assessing the quality of the acting...” (Turner, 103). Theatre alternately sweeps you up into the emotion and affect of an experience, and then it brings you down into an awareness of how it is being composed. This self-awareness of a group’s assembly is what makes theatre a spring of creativity. It’s no wonder that theatricality is experiencing such a renaissance in the contemporary arts. It counteracts the modern impulse to critique and deconstruct (and the anti-modern’s resignation of all action to failure).

This is exactly the position that I found myself in during the early months of 2007. After a year and a half of total immersion in an MFA program that focused me intensely on the critical history and skills of contemporary art practice, I felt no desire to act. None of my inclinations; none of my reasons for making performance seemed to make any sense within the concerns of the art world. So I decided to make a performance that would draw its creativity from doing nothing.

²⁴ Lyn Hejinian, lecture at the University of Chicago, *The Return of Interruption*, Chicago (May 10, 2006).

Soon, I was making performances for public spaces that introduced a radical condition of stillness.²⁵ I called the performances 'still-acts' after the artist Lin Hixon introduced me to the work of anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis, who uses the term to describe actions in everyday space and time that subtly alter our perceptions, senses and attention.²⁶ To perform the still acts, I asked people to stand or sit in static groups for long durations of time. We would situate the still acts on steps, down sidewalks, and on deserted side streets. The effect was similar to a *tableaux vivant*,²⁷ or a living picture on the urban landscape where passers-by would encounter an unexpected space and time of stillness.²⁸ To create the still act, I would assemble large groups of performers and ask them to hold everyday gestures that had some specific or heightened quality. Many who encountered the still acts photographed them. Some ignored them. Some tried to interrupt them. A surprising number of people sat down and joined the stillness, blurring the distinction between observer and observed.

2. Theatre is conflict. Use it. Artaud says that the emanation of a feeling starts with a build-up of physical tension (Artaud 1958, 138). The same can be said for events. Passionate interests can be found wherever interventions, accidents and breakdowns occur. We can look for their traces in documents, court records, archives, battle accounts, memoirs, museums and ruins. Some actors hide the traces of a controversy well.

²⁵ Bryan Markovitz, *Still Acts*, (Chicago and Portland, 2006-2007):
<http://www.bryanmarkovitz.com/still-acts/>

²⁶ C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*, ed. C. Nadia Seremetakis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

²⁷ *Tableaux vivants* are thought to have originated in religious and ceremonial processions prior to the nineteenth century. See Roger E. Reynolds, "The Drama of Medieval Liturgical Processions," *Revue de Musicologie* (Société Française de Musicologie) 86, no. 1 (2000): 127-142. For a nineteenth century reference to *tableaux vivants*, see Edith Wharton's description of the Welly Brys entrance into society with a "general entertainment" in *The House of Mirth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905). The tradition of *tableaux vivants* is maintained today in the enormously popular Pageant of the Masters (<http://www.foapom.com/>). Aspects of the genre can also be found in the works of many contemporary artists, including Vanessa Beecroft, Eve Sussman, Cindy Sherman and Robert Wilson, to name a few.

²⁸ My interest in activating emotions through action follows a Spinozan ethics where mind and body function as two parts of the same substance. For a good summary of this as it relates to my goals for the still act, see Steven Brown and Paul Stenner, "Being Addicted: Spinoza and the Psychology of Emotion," *International Journal of Group Tensions* (Human Sciences Press, Inc.) 30, no. 1 (2001).

We might need to create what Latour calls ‘counterfactual histories’ that help us re-trace their hidden steps (Latour 2005, 80-82). Controversies are made up of narratives coming from different actors and different directions. Our world needs new ways of research and presentation to account for all of these tangled connections. We need to compose in ways that are ‘fractionally coherent’, as John Law would say. In other words, we would benefit from trying to draw more things together without centering them.²⁹

3. Assemble more than you interpret. When actors converge, they frantically search for ways to express their passionate interests. They mark boundaries, employ spokespersons and activate mediators of all kinds to render their interests durable and competitive with competing interests. As a result, no group is stable for long. They are always engaged in formation or displacement (Latour 2005, 27). In a theatre of passionate interests, we can help actors describe the conditions that make it possible for their groups to form, and leave it to them to interpret what they are doing. If the performance is well composed, the meaning of the performance will become apparent on its own.

In 2005, I witnessed a performance that was composed entirely from the performers’ experience of walking through a city and recalling their interactions with the people and things they encountered. Titled *The Days of the Sledgehammer Have Gone*, the performance was created by Gregg Whelan and Gary Winters from the British performance duo, Lone Twin. They would reassemble the performance every time they brought it to another city, where they would walk again, making lists to help them recall their visit. For the performance that I saw in Portland, Gregg and Gary arrived several days before the event, walked through the city, met people and make lists. The performance itself was a highly specific, yet widely inclusive, account of their time in the city and the groups of people they met. Throughout it, Whelan and Winters performed with a sense of generosity that ultimately invited us in the audience to help them compose the end of the performance when the duo, clad in Army surplus ponchos, led us into the street and encouraged us to help them make a cloud. Beneath his poncho, Gary was buried in multiple layers of clothing to accumulate body heat throughout the night. Once outside, standing in the middle of the crowded sidewalk, he began to remove his clothes, layer by layer. As he did this, Gregg offered the audience cups filled with water that they had collected from the Willamette River. When he reached the last shirt, Gary cried out “This is what I do to feel a part of things; this is what I do to blur my edges,” and

²⁹ John Law, *Aircraft Stories: Decentering the Object in Technoscience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 4-5.

on his cue, we threw our cups of water over his naked torso, which evaporated into a visible cloud rising from his shoulders.³⁰

4. Use all kinds of objects to enliven actors. Anything that can transmit the agency of an actor is potentially useful for performance – projectors, software, books, receipts, weapons, luxury handbags, centrifuges. They are all great tools for making actors speak. Latour calls them ‘handles’ that help us grasp the important things that actors are doing. Some act as simple stand-ins or props, others as more complex mediators. Latour also refers to some of these tools as ‘panoramas’ because they surround you with everything that their creators want you to see, while closing off contradictory narratives outside of them (Latour 2005, 183). Plays are great panoramas, as are movies, manifestoes and mathematical theorems. Another kind of tool that Latour defines is a ‘plug-in’ (Latour 2005, 204). A plug-in is anything that an actor uses to interpret experience. Bar codes, graphs, timepieces, clothing, advertisements, computers and magazines are all ‘plugged-in’ to actors.

Many of the performances that I made with Liminal used plug-ins for the audience. For example, in a project called *Objects for the Emancipated Consumer*,³¹ we designed and programmed a system that allowed audience members to initiate media events by choosing from a collection of bar-coded objects that, when scanned by the computer system, would trigger video projections, lighting cues and sound recordings. The human actors in the performance responded to these changes with rehearsed actions that would set a whole new series of events into motion. We set no limits on the number of times that a certain media event could be repeated, nor did we try to control when the audience would select an object. Thus, the performance was always specific in its assembly, but open to new combinations that shaped the experience in unpredictable ways.

A fourth tool that Latour talks about is much more ambiguous, but interesting to consider. He gives the name ‘plasma’ to things that are present, but not yet fully formatted or materially engaged in social connections (Latour 2005, 241). In *The Resurrectory*, the actors used a pile of wood stumps, strips of leather, and other raw materials to create “blank” objects needed during the performance. Over time, the actors

³⁰ For more about Lone Twin’s performance techniques, see Gregg Whelan and Gary Winters, “Of Pigs & Lovers: A Lone Twin Research Companion,” (*Liveart Magazine*) 31 (2001).

³¹ I co-founded Liminal in 1997 and directed most of its dozen or so performances and installations. To learn more about *Objects for the Emancipated Consumer*, 2001, see <http://www.bryanmarkovitz.com/liminal/objects-for-the-emancipated-consumer/>

would carve, mold and sew together the blanks until they had gathered enough form to become something necessary – a bottle, a pipe, a reliquary. Not only could the actors use the object, but audiences, who could fully explore the environment, were free to touch, smell, move or make these objects themselves.

5. Help individuals participate in the specific qualities of a composition. As actors and their relations multiply, theatre practice gives us public ways to consult with each other and gradually define the qualities that make up shared experience. A theatre of passionate interests embraces the need for groups to define standards every time they come together. The best performances make a bet, take risks, share confidences and assert choices. From the playwright to the audience, we all have a role to play in defining the performance in experimental processes. When we do this, we create a conversation about the best choices to make.

In my own work, I continue to investigate the role that performance plays in non-artistic spaces of creation and design. My employment in the field of experience design has given me insight into the ways that businesses across multiple industries embrace non-specific notions of ‘co-creation,’ ‘collaboration,’ and ‘transformation’ for consumers through creative practices such as design and performance. Pick up any copy of *Fast Company* and you will see how important design has become for differentiating products and services in business, not to mention in politics. The difference between these practices and the kind of theatre-as-experimentation that I have proposed is one of intent. I am less concerned with producing pre-defined statements and reproducing predictable experience than I am with the role of performance in forming expressions that are often operating beneath the surface of direct communication.

6. Space and time are fully malleable. Theatre’s capacity to activate many times and settings can do things that are impossible in other parts of life. Events can be folded to bring them together or pull them apart. Space can be displaced, stretched or compressed instantaneously. Similarly, the theatre can activate different perceptions of time and space for the one and many simultaneously. In *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben writes about the work of Jakob von Uexküll, a zoologist who proposed that space and time are not fixed as the same for all living things. Theatre is not one single event, but a different event for each participant. According to Uexküll, all living creatures inhabit their own ‘stage’ of experience called an *umwelt*.³² The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk also describes how

³² Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): 39-43.

humans each live in their own “inter-ignorant systems” and inhabit a series of layered inhabitable cells called foam. He describes architects as the kind of people who have to have the skill of “polyvalence” to deal with different milieus of people.³³ I believe that polyvalence also applies to the theatre artist. If we think of space and time as departure and arrival points on a nonlinear path, or as elements in an experiment without cause and effect, we will begin to invent new methods for organizing experience that expand the range of ways that participants inhabit theatre.

Space and time also need not be constrained to known quantities or common organizing structures. The Dallas Theater Center designed by OMA and REX Architects gives us a sense of how formal theatre spaces could become more polyvalent.³⁴ The Wyly Theatre is completely composed of modular elements that are reconfigurable for a number of forms and uses, including events other than theatre, such as parties, trade-shows and anything else one could imagine. Different stage platforms and seating can be dropped in and pulled out of the space for different needs. The architecture unfolds and re-folds to articulate the needs of participants over time. In a theatre of passionate interests, time may also fold. The past may need to be brought into the present, and possible futures may need to be performed in overlapping configurations of space.

7. Build new worlds in parallel with existing ones. What we do as artists makes a difference, no matter how insignificant our actions may seem. When we take advantage of theatre’s capabilities to imagine and perform new kinds of experience, we change existing ones and we invent the future. A few years ago, I was invited with six other artists to be on a short-lived reality television series called Artstar.³⁵ As our main project during the filming of the episodes, we were asked by the producers to create a group show for the Scope Art Fair in Miami Beach. While I had no interest in making or selling art objects, I was expected to participate in the fair, so I decided to use my performance skills to make a second, imaginary ‘art fair’ on the periphery of the real one. To do this, I described my imagined fair in a one-page proposal and left it in the Artstar gallery as an invitation for visitors to join me outside.

³³ Peter Sloterdijk, “Spheres Theory: Talking to Myself about the Poetics of Space,” *Harvard Design Magazine* (Harvard University Press) 30, no. 1 (2009).

³⁴ Office for Metropolitan Architecture and REX Architects, *Dee and Charles Wyly Theatre*, <http://www.rex-ny.com/work/wyly-theatre/>

³⁵ Artstar Season 2 was pretty boring television. It had no competitive aspect, and the show never aired in the U.S. In the wake of the 2008 recession, the network that produced it (Voom HD) folded and it was shelved in the archives. For more about the first season of Artstar, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artstar>

The peripheral art fair took place in the warm Miami sun on a massive basketball court behind the Scope tents, where kids from the neighborhood were playing and hanging out. All that I needed to make the fair were the boundary lines of the basketball courts (to define the gallery spaces), and some chalk (to make the art). At first, the art took the form of written dedications to friends and fellow artists that I composed in each gallery space. As I worked, the youngest neighborhood kids started to help me write the dedications. Eventually, they started to create their own dedications and drawings, until they had completely covered the basketball courts in a collage of colorful chalk drawings that made it one of the largest, most collaborative, and most overlooked works of art on display at any of the Miami fairs.³⁶

8. To invent new experience, make more work. A friend once told me that nothing is more loving than habit. Your work, no matter how insignificant it may seem, is all you need to do to make a difference in the world. No one has the right answers. No explanations are needed. The best way to respond to the passionate interests around you is to make more art in more ways. Not everyone will see what you've done. Your projects will stack up. Ideas will sit, waiting to be performed. Piles will grow into archives and your projects, your career, will never be fully explained or appreciated. But it will be there, waiting for someone to re-trace the history that you helped make.

Now that we have some new approaches to add to our practices, how might this theatre of passionate interests take shape? Well, you should know that a theatre of passionate interests is already happening around us. We can keep working within the walls of our theatre or studios, but we can also get out into the world and work with others. We can expand our experimental tools and practices, not limit them. We can increase perplexity, not reduce it. We can create new forms of public assembly versus known forms of experience. Finally, we can engage people in acts of active composition rather than passive moments of spacing out.

We are at a threshold between what theatre can do as an art and what it can do as a political activity. Agamben writes, "The threshold is not an outside beyond our limit, but the experience of the limit itself, the experience of being within an outside."³⁷ Theatre's strength is its application of direct experience as a way to deliberate and act as a community. A theatre of passionate interests happens close to the fire of

³⁶ Bryan Markovitz, *Peripheral Art Fair*, Scope Art Fair Miami Beach, 2007, <http://www.bryanmarkovitz.com/art-fair/>

³⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

life, where the shadows of our lively, talkative, active, pluralistic and mediated activities can be projected into the world.

We must innovate through theatre so that it may again play a vital role in helping people perform the future they hope to see. “A matter of concern,” Latour says, “is what happens to a matter of fact when you add to it its whole scenography, much like you would do by shifting your attention from the stage to the whole machinery of a theatre.”³⁸ In a world of pure experience, performance becomes the subject of its own assembly – any experience it brings into existence might propel us into new and better ways of living. My invitation to you, the makers of a theatre of passionate interests, is that you stand before the flames and cast your shadow as far as it will reach.

³⁸ Bruno Latour, *What is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, Spinoza Lecture II, Department of Philosophy, University of Amsterdam (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 2008), 39.