Chapter Title: Introduction Perhaps the Medium-Specificity of the Contemporary Performing Arts is Mutation?

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Introduction

Perhaps the Medium-Specificity of the Contemporary Performing Arts is Mutation?

Art is often a bastard, the parents of which we do not know.
Nam June Paik

Artistic media seem to be – more than ever – in a permanent condition of mutation. Mutation is a term borrowed from molecular biology and genetic science referring to the permanent change in the DNA sequence of a gene. Mutations in a gene's DNA structure not only alter the connectivity within the DNA sequence but might also change a protein produced by a gene. In much the same way, we inhabit an ever-mutating media landscape where once separate media levels are interconnecting in novel configurations and where different media devices and forms shape-shift in a most surprising way. Take the example of the applause, one of the devices that 'belong' to the live performing arts. The act of clapping is an expression of approval or admiration towards live performers. However, we found ourselves applauding before a machine in Kris Verdonck's *Actor #1* (2010). It is obvious that Verdonck's creations are situated in the transit zone between visual arts and theatre, between installations and performance, dance and architecture. This not only affects the mutual relation between these media but also our attitude towards their mutating devices and forms. Have you ever found yourself applauding in a museum, before a 'dead' painting? Did you ever wonder why (not)?

The rise of mutating media is an evident consequence of the fact that artists have been searching for innovation and controversy throughout the twentieth century. The avant-garde idea that started as a revolt against the long-established traditions and prevailing institutional codes also entailed a radical deconstruction of the supposedly separate media levels. Artists challenged one another to combine daily life with tradition or to mix artistic and popular media. The boom of multimedia (combining and crossing over into various media) not only liberated art from its canonical disciplines, it also turned it into a vast diversity of experiments. Concurrently, technological revolutions brought about a re-enactment of old media like film and theatre, as well as a sweeping influx of new media.

Thanks to these transformations, artists now have an extensive set of instruments at their disposal. But what is more important, they also became highly aware of the nature

of media and their differences. They investigate the limits and possibilities of the media they use and experiment with the crossing over, upgrading and mutilating of media. Or they explicitly explore the unknown intermedial space between existing media, searching for the hybrid beings that occupy these in-betweens. Needless to say, this condition of transgression and mutation fits perfectly well with the spirit of the age: globalization, migration, transculturalism, the end of grand narratives, the fading of traditional values and the steep rise of individualism. The dynamic postmodern plurality of contemporary society goes hand in hand with a fast-evolving diversity in contemporary art.

This diversity, however, implies a major challenge for art theory. The lack of general traditions and overall tendencies make it impossible for scholars to analyse contemporary art in explicit terms or paradigm examples without the risk of severe reduction or even sheer speculation. This, by the way, explains why a non-category like 'media art' has become successful or why concepts with suggestive prefixes are so common today – e.g. 'the post-medium condition' (Rosalind Krauss), 'postdramatic theatre' (Hans-Thies Lehmann) and 'altermodernism' (Nicolas Bourriaud). The only general thesis that remains largely undisputed, therefore, seems to be the diversification of art itself.

This issue of *Theater Topics* takes the theme of mutating and adapting media as a starting point for a twofold inquiry into the so-called contemporary performing arts. First, we take it as an opportunity to discuss what makes its diversity specific. Some underlying mapping questions are: What are the different domains that take part in the evolution of the contemporary performing arts? How did basic aspects of theatre evolve? How did historical traditions in drama adapt to new cultural contexts? What are these mutants, and what is their added value? How does the stage contextualize media that are normally used elsewhere? How do old media – i.e. their aesthetics, canon, technology and methods – get remediated in contemporary performances? In sum, what are the challenges, restrictions and implications of a deep play with old and new media on a stage? Obviously, the different contributions included in this volume cannot provide an extensive answer to all these questions. But the case studies and the lines of thought they develop do give an exploratory overview of the scope of the topic.

Another question that was, in fact, the main incentive to create this book is: Does mutation eventually lead to a contamination or even a disintegration of what we call theatre, or rather to a revaluation and thus to a confirmation thereof in the long run? In other words, does mutation turn theatre into a bastard or a new playmate? By way of a preliminary answer to this question, the claim we want to put forward with this book is that basically mutation is what the contemporary performing arts stands for: a playground for innovation in which what is already done is constantly put at stake. Rather than deconstructing this thing called 'the contemporary performing arts' into an unknown 'other', mutation in fact generates them, as its very offspring – the otherness – is exactly what we take to be the contemporary performing arts. Put differently, in academic-scholastic terms: mutation is what makes theatre medium-specific today.

Of course, mutation is a principal driving force of innovation for contemporary art in

general. In our view, however, it is especially important for the contemporary performing arts in particular, not only because it takes central stage here but also because its outcome coincides to a much larger extent with what we essentially take to be the 'contemporary' performing arts. In fine art, for instance, the crossover with other media like film, music, theatre or architecture generated new forms: video art, sound art, performance art, installation art. But these developments should be understood as extensions, hybrids actually, which enabled fine art to reinvent and redefine itself into a new and broader heterogeneous artistic field that gathers a new generation of experiments with classical media (sculpture, drawing, painting, etc.) next to these new forms. In the case of the contemporary performing arts, on the contrary, there is hardly anything else but these newly created forms (in which classical elements are often integrated – or replaced by newcomers).

One of the reasons for this is that, to this day, the distinction between 'classic' and 'contemporary' is upheld in performing arts: theatre companies still perform classical plays or interpretations thereof, while in the case of fine art, the 'classics' belong to the museum of art history. Consequently, newly created work in classical media is considered to take part in 'contemporary' fine art (or else it might qualify as 'amateur art', even if it is 'professionally' made...). Another reason might be that, in evolutionary terms, theatre as a medium seems to be very robust. It can, therefore, easily allow radical experiments without (completely) losing its identity. For instance, many contemporary experiments revolve around breaking away from the standard structure of theatre, which goes back at least to the Greek amphitheatre: a stage, an audience, performers, a live event, a play, a play time. Performances in situ or in public space, interactive theatre, marathon plays, etc. mainly – if not only – make sense as a variation. What makes them special is defined in relation to the standard structure that functions as a signifying gravitational force in the background. The same goes for so-called intermedial experiments: the very description 'intermedial' already lays bare a relational concept with respect to classical theatre, which also implies that the success of these experiments depends on the originality of the adaptation they provoke. Therefore, what is 'intermedial' in relation to classical theatre is what makes the contemporary performing arts medium-specific in its quest for authenticity and individuality. In evolutionary terms: it is all part of a process of selection and fitness in order to keep the experienced audience persuaded, surprised and ignited in relation to what they are already acquainted with. At the end of the day, these are the central criteria for acceptance and lasting impressions as a contemporary performing arts piece.

The first chapter in this volume – *Theatre Between Performance and Installation: Three Contemporary Belgian Examples* – elaborates on this central aspect of mutation as medium-specificity. Christophe Van Gerrewey thus opens up the discussion of the standard structure of theatre as the DNA of new creations to come. He focuses on the importance of the architectural domain of the theatre compared with the institutional context of the museum by means of a discussion of installation, performance and archive mu-

tated to a theatrical situation. Van Gerrewey develops his comparison based on an analysis of three contemporary productions from Belgium: *Viewmaster* by Heike Langsdorf, Ula Sickel and Laurent Liefooghe (2007-2010), *End* by Kris Verdonck (2008) and *You are here* by Deepblue (2008).

Next, we included three chapters that study the topic of mutation and adaptation from a broader perspective. Instead of a clear-cut focus on the complex crossovers between artistic media, the dynamic and intertwining relation between theatre and political reality is taken into account. The first of these chapters is a nosedive into history. *The Fourth Wall, or the Rift Between Citizen and Government. Another Attempt at a Conceptual Synthesis of Theatre and Politics* by Klaas Tindemans brings a historical study of the evolution of the relation between actors and audience and how this represents the organization of society – i.e. the relation between governments and citizens. His analysis of the parallels between theatrical and political representation opens up a refreshing perspective on not only the state of the contemporary performing arts but also of present-day politics.

The second chapter on the mutating relation between theatre and politics focuses on the use of recorded images (i.e. film or TV footage) on a stage, and how such hybrids evoke critical perspectives on political reality (and bourgeois theatre). In *Using Recorded Images for Political Purposes,* Nancy Delhalle brings an overview of the different uses and intended effects of staging recorded images throughout the twentieth century: to confront the imaginary realm of the theatre with the hard facts of daily life, to open up the spectator's imaginary world, to tell a story that puts the actors' play in a bigger perspective, to reveal a shocking (hidden) truth, etc. Delhalle illustrates her analysis with two case studies: *Rwanda 94* (2000) by the Belgian enterprise Groupov, and *Photo-Romance* (2009) from the Lebanese artists Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué. In both plays, new strategies emerge that do not use recorded images to testify but rather to stress the reticular perception of our being in the world under the influence of mass media (and how this transforms the aesthetics of theatre from the viewpoint of a contemporary viewer).

The third chapter on theatre and politics discusses how mutated theatre can enhance its own conditions and, hence, can become a political reality itself rather than just subversively representing one. In *A Campsite for the Avant-Garde and a Church in Cyberspace: Christoph Schlingensief's Dialogue with Avant-Gardism*, Anna Scheer elaborates on the work of a remarkable artist, Christoph Schlingensief (1960-2010), who was capable of turning the metaphysics of political exclusion into performances bigger than life. After a discussion of the production *ATTA-ATTA: Art has Broken Out!* (2003), in order to identify Schlingensief's battle with the avant-garde's legacy, she examines his subsequent hybrid and long-term project *The Church of Fear*. In this work, the boundaries of the theatre space are left behind to engage with the dominant discourses of the social imaginary both in virtual space and with 'activist' events in public spaces. Through radical flirts with exposure and provocation, Schlingensief and his company managed to surpass the distinction between art and activism. But the bastard they created is no doubt an enlightening extension of both.

Following these three chapters on the mutating interplay between reality and politics, we present another trio of papers, this time dwelling on the revisiting of historical elements – aesthetics, classics and styles – in the contemporary performing arts. In the first of these, *Echoes from the Animist Past: Abattoir Fermé's Dark Backward and Abysm of Time*, Evelien Jonckheere traces heritable influences in the work of the Belgian company Abattoir Fermé. In doing so, she demonstrates that by analysing contemporary experiments against a background of (supposed) cultural ancestors – taxidermy, the carnivalesque, curiosity cabinets, shamanism, etc. – a vivid interpretation can be developed that sheds a new clarifying light on a dark oeuvre that became famous for its art of mutating. Paradoxically, it is the use of these pre-modern elements that gives the performances of Abattoir Fermé their contemporary air.

The second chapter of this trio also explores the issue of interpretation. In *Folding Mutants or Crumbling Hybrids? Of Looking Baroque in Contemporary Theatre and Performance*, Jeroen Coppens considers the baroque as a tool to interpret contemporary art. By way of comment on the current neo-baroque discourse with respect to mutating media, Coppens argues that an actualization of the baroque ought to be based on the perspective that baroque art produces (and thus is famous for) rather than on formal analogies. To make his case, he offers an analysis of the baroque vision that is present in the hybrid theatre work of Romeo Castellucci: are the mix of meanings and the blurring of the borders between reality and illusion in *Tragedia Endogonidia* a resuscitation of baroque experiments with the *bel composto* – the beautiful union of multiple media?

In the third chapter on the breeding of historical elements, the floor is given to two artists: Sarah Kenderdine and Jeffrey Shaw. In *Making UNMAKEABLELOVE: The Relocation of Theatre*, they explain how they took a classic drama – Samuel Beckett's prose work *The Lost Ones* – as well as the inventions of early cinema (e.g. the *Kaiserpanorama*, a stereoscopic cylindrical peepshow) as a starting point to create a machine theatre called UN-MAKEABLELOVE (2008). This high-tech installation offers an interactive and physically immersive three-dimensional space of representation that constitutes an augmentation of real and virtual realities. The initial confrontation that takes place in Beckett's short story between ourselves and another society of lost ones is resurrected in a cyber realm of physical and psychological entropy.

In what follows, we present a set of chapters that discuss – each in a different respect – the diversity of what could be called post-medium species. However, in order to avoid vague debates on the degree of mutation of different contemporary experiments – is it an adaptation or does it present a new line of life in the pedigree of media? – we opted for a mapping borrowed from an old typology from evolution theory. In this so-called mutation theory, advanced at the beginning of the twentieth century by the Dutch botanist Hugo de Vries, a basic distinction is made between three types of mutation: progressive mutations (the appearance of wholly new properties), retrogressive mutations (the loss of a trait) and regressive mutations (an activation of a trait long latent in the species). By the 1920s, however, the development of genetics refuted all the main

principles of the mutation theory and thus reminded scientists of the easily forgotten truth that our intelligence can hardly compete with the complexity of reality. Nevertheless, the fact that this typology died out in biology is at the same time a good pretext to revive it as a simplistic but useful pedagogical instrument.

Closed-circuit television (CCTV) art is but one example of progressive mutation. In *Witness Protection? Surveillance Technologies in Theatrical Performance*, Elise Morrison discusses the genre of 'surveillance theatre'. These performances are characterized by the significant integration of technologies of surveillance into the form and content of live theatre works. Surveillance technologies are welcomed as a new characteristic that challenges artists to probe progressive mutations by remediating the phenomenology of surveillance in a theatrical setting. In addition to being evocative of a host of contemporary social and political hot-button issues – issues of control, discipline, CCTV evidence, freedom, etc. – these technologies can serve as particularly effective tools with which artists can stage formal provocations to habitual conceptions of both theatre and surveillance.

The so-called 'documentary theatre' can also be considered part of the family tree of progressive mutants. In her chapter *The Work of Art in the Age of its Intermedial Reproduction. Rimini Protokoll's Mnemopark*, Katia Arfara provides not only an intriguing illustration of what documentary theatre can be but also how it can be brought into being by the medial crossing of painting, video art and theatre. Based upon an actual railway model – at a scale of 1:87 – Rimini Protokoll's *Mnemopark* stages a hybrid theatricality while calling into question the very place of the spectator and, therefore, questioning the very notion of perception from an intermedial perspective. The reproduction of Swiss landscapes by new media technologies such as micro-cameras allows the director Stefan Kaegi to examine documentary theatre through the pictorial landscape tradition.

In addition to this case study, we also include, as a deviation, if you will, or as a twin variation on the line-up we presented so far, an interview with Stefan Kaegi by Frederik Le Roy. In *Rimini Protokoll's Theatricalization of Reality*, Le Roy further elaborates on how mutation is also induced by the employed strategies of appropriation of different types of documents such as films, news media, radio plays, video footage, diaries, photos, etc., as well as of different cultural traditions and popular stereotypes.

Next, we turn to two studies of retrogressive mutation: how can the loss of certain traits create new kinds of theatrical descendants? Typical of retrogressive mutation is that certain features are left behind (or put to the background) so that a free play of other elements can induce an emersion of new constellations. In *Digital Landscapes: The Meta-Picturesque Qualities of Kurt d'Haeseleer's Audiovisual Sceneries*, Nele Wynants analyses the artistic spirit that motivates the versatile oeuvre of Belgian artist Kurt d'Haeseleer. According to Wynants, whether it concerns an experimental short film, the VJ or live cinema of a music performance, an interactive installation or the videography of a performance, all of his works appear as (digital) landscapes as a result of their outspoken pictorial cinematography. In his self-proclaimed 'visual machinery' *S*CKMYP* (2004), for instance, the observer is dropped into a kaleidoscopic labyrinth, driven through a

fragmented landscape of screens by the mesmerizing voice of the author as a narrative guide. In terms of retrogressive mutation, this means that the actors' play is largely put aside in favour of the creation of theatrical landscapes that await the spectator's gaze.

Another example of retrogressive mutation is found in the exceptional work of French media artist Julien Maire. In *The Productivity of the Prototype: On Julien Maire's Cinema of Contraptions*, Edwin Carels presents one of the first extensive discussions of the groundbreaking work of a promising artist who became famous for developing what can be called medial prototypes. Like d'Haeseleer, Maire also moves away from drama and the actor's play, not to create pictorial landscapes but to experiment with performances and installations in which the technological medium is the protagonist. By means of experiments with the ontology of audiovisual media, Maire produces a new, specifically post-medium image quality.

Finally, to conclude our application of mutation theory on the contemporary performing arts, two examples of *regressive* mutation are tackled: how can the activation of a (long latent) property go hand in hand with the genesis of new artistic strategies? In cases of regression, full attention is given to certain components of the medium of theatre by implementing constraints or by using reductive approaches. This, however, might seem at odds with the idea of creating something new and diverse by means of the art of mutation which normally implies, and thus is associated with, the maximization of instruments, stratification, abundance of media, etc. Yet, the fact that mutation in terms of maximization is so common already explains why a method of minimization offers an original alternative. In *The Theatre of Recorded Sound and Film: Vacating Performance in Michael Curran's 'Look What They Done To My Song'*, Marco Pustianaz draws our attention to a modality of theatre where the realm of recording (a song) instead of the event itself can 'come to pass' before a spectator. In his performance-installation, the Scottish artist Michael Curran performs the myth surrounding a song by framing its absence. The mise-en-scène of the loss of the original performance (the live music session) is produced through a re-installation of a space that displays memory traces of the initial event: films of a recording session, a recorded soundscape and the remains of the recording studio with the abandoned set.

In a second example, a regressive mutation is created not by an evocation of something that is vacated but by a focus on repetition. In *Doubled Bodies and Live Loops. On Ragnar Kjartansson's Mediatized Performances*, Eva Heisler examines how the performance-based works of the Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson re-invent the practices of 'liveness' and 'endurance' associated with 1970s performance art. It is argued that Kjartansson's use of exuberant repetition within the context of theatrical conventions mediatizes the liveness that historically has been fetishized in performance art. The article closes with a consideration of Kjartansson's *The End*, a six-month painting performance at the 2009 Venice Biennale that, in its staging of a romantic image of the painter in his studio, extends the artist's preoccupation with mediatized live performance and, as with all of Kjartansson's work, presents a conflation of theatre and performance art.

With this last case study of the piece *The End*, our reconnaissance of the specificity of the diversity of the contemporary performing arts is also coming to an end. With the fourteen chapters we have introduced so far, we hope to have shown that the enigma of mutation encloses many surprising dimensions and directions. Moreover, we hope that the reader will consider our central thesis: that mutation is not only the drive behind the contemporary performing arts into something 'new' or 'other', but it is actually also a good candidate to comprehend its very medium-specificity. Finally, by way of disclaimer, we challenge the reader to question the rudimentary typology developed above. One of its implications is that mutation need not necessarily be conceptualized as crossbreeding between media, since it can also be conceived as a process of self-fertilization (in terms of the rise and loss of traits, or the explicit activation of existing ones). Indeed, it might very well be the case that we have been far too enthusiastic in interpreting new evolutions in performing arts as something intermedial rather than something genuinely specific for theatre in a contemporary modus. Maybe our vision was often too limited, too preoccupied with other media, too fascinated also with the baby bliss of new media to understand that also theatre would adapt in its own right – at the same pace we all try to – to the drastic evolutions our society has been going through?

In any case, as an antidote to the temptation to overstress mutation – we confess our susceptibility to this in the preparation of this book – we conclude the book with an interview by dramaturge Tom Engels with the German director Antonia Baehr. In *Between Solitaire and a Basketball Game: Dramaturgical Strategies in the Work of Antonia Baehr*, a discussion unfolds that demonstrates that there are also artists who work with different media without necessarily wanting to combine them.

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