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Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards
in Pontedera, Italy, 2009–2012

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In spring 2009, I joined a group of people who went for a study visit to the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards – the last theatre centre founded by Grotowski – in Pontedera, Italy. Two groups of artists were working there at the time: Focused Research Team in Art as Vehicle supervised by Thomas Richards, and Open Program Team led by Mario Biagini.

During my visit, the Biagini group was rehearsing an action, part of which was later transformed into the performative opus *I Am America*. This dramatic structure was composed of traditional slave songs from the American South and Allen Ginsberg's poems related to Buddhist, anti-war and gay issues. These poems were analysing and criticising the conservative form of American society, that is, they belong to engaged poetry. In the opus, they were either sung to melodic lines composed by the performers or spoken in the form of monologues or dialogues.

I Am America – an hour-long, incredibly dynamic performative opus of a very high quality of performance, evocatively influencing the perception of its witness and oriented around the poem 'America', beginning with the famous incipit 'America I've given you all and now I'm nothing'¹ – appeared to me as an ethnically and culturally varied choir. A choir that was singing and chanting, performing engaged poetry against the conservatism of an Americanised reality, but which was at the same time and by means I could not fully grasp a 'community that sings and dances its own proper unity'.² As I was observing the performances of the Ginsberg poems during the following days, I was struck by the particular quality of the bond between the performers, that had been developed in order to achieve such a stunning artistic effect in this action.

I began to recognise the number of particular performative techniques related to contact, mutual support in singing and monologuing, group structure during action, with determined positions and roles for each performer and the dynamics of changes within these positions and fields. The issues related to complex relations between the individual and the super-individual also became clearer to me. During observation, I began to perceive the group of performers as a set of individuals in the process of constituting a community, in which the individuals are connected by a high-quality bond built on reciprocity and empathy, and the collective choreography flowing in organic streams as the continuing 'authentic movement characteristic of communal bodies'.³ The energetic message

1 Allen Ginsberg, 'America', in: *Collected Poems 1974-1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 154.

2 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 9.

3 Ranciere, 9.

extracted from Ginsberg's critical poems was enriched by affirmative idea of praxis of communal life.

Thus, the intuition began to evolve inside me that in the process of developing the 'tools' for perfecting 'Art as vehicle' – a term used to describe the final period of Grotowski's creative work, which will be used throughout this article – the tools for establishing the bond between performers were simultaneously developed. They allowed for achieving the extremely high quality of reciprocity within the community of performers and exclude from it external observers. In other words, along with the number of aspects related to current work of Grotowski's heirs, such as self-development and development of acting skills present in the Workcenter since its beginnings and reflected upon by Grotowski and later by Thomas Richards, I find the element of action in the area of issues related to collective life, that is, community, especially important.

The emergence of communal perspective in the course of development of the tools of Art as vehicle in the recollections of Thomas Richards

When I use the impersonal form of a verb as 'were developed' – in the context of Art as vehicle tools supporting the establishment of the bond between the doers – my intention is not to ascribe to Grotowski the intention of exploring issues of group or community in the last period of his work. In the texts constitutive for his Italian period – 'Performer' or 'From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle' – we would not find any indications which would entitle us to make such a move. According to Thomas Richards, the tools I have in mind, 'ancient vibratory songs',⁴ 'can become tools for the human being to work on himself [...], that help the organism in a process of what we can call a transformation of energy',⁵ which Richards, in his intimate language, calls the 'inner action'. 'The traditional song [...] is an instrument of verticality'⁶ is the laconic expression of Grotowski.

The intuitions which enable the delineation of the communal perspective of Art as vehicle appear gradually in traces left by Richards in his book *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*, in which he discusses such issues as the relations between a doer and 'another person' and contact between partners, only to appear almost explicitly during creation and exploitation of performative structure called *Action* in the mid-1990s. In his conversation with Lisa Wolford registered in Pontedera in August 1995, Richards said that during performative actions '[t]his can create a strong energy reservoir between the two people, and what we can call the transformation of energy can seem to be no longer existing just in one or in the other, but in both and between. [...] This is something that has been appearing rather recently in the work.'⁷ 'Rather recently' can refer to the period after the end of exploiting the *Downstairs Action*, which can be 'regarded as the collection of individual studies

4 Thomas Richards, *Heart of Practice: Within the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 6.

5 Richards, 6.

6 Jerzy Grotowski, 'From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle', in Thomas Richards, *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), 127.

7 Richards, *Heart of Practice*, 20.

[...] connected by the group singing led by Richards',⁸ that is, around 1993 or 1994.

At the same time, in Richards's conversation with Tatiana Motta Lima in July 1999 in Pontedera published as 'As an Unbroken Stream' in his book *Heart of Practice*, he goes back to 1986 – the year the Workcenter was established – and to the times described in *At Work with Grotowski*, and answers the question about the contact between partners: 'Grotowski created circumstances in which a kind of contact might appear'.⁹ Richards was talking about the situation when Grotowski told him to continue the development of his 'acting proposition', which he had been doing individually, 'in the room with the others'.¹⁰ Richards added:

I remember feeling that Mario [Biagini] at that moment was in some way attentive to what I was doing. This dialogue gave life to his work and to mine. A strong connection through the distance appeared between his song and mine; for example, the two songs became like one, in a special harmony.¹¹

This description suggests that though Grotowski created 'circumstances in which a kind of contact might appear', in view of the technical aspect of working on physical actions, probably the issue of contact, 'hidden dialogue' and 'special harmony' could exist from the beginning of Art as vehicle, unarticulated by Grotowski, but enabling the development of the communal aspect. Perhaps this particular approach in Richards's testimony from 1999 results from the fact that experiencing the transformation of energy 'in both [doers] and between' from the mid-1990s retroactively projected the origin of this phenomenon onto the tools and practices developed since the establishment of the centre.

Let us return to the conversation with Lisa Wolford four years earlier. Answering the researcher's question about songs passed 'through oral transmission',¹² Richards said:

The danger is that because of the swiftness of communication and travel in modern society, and what we can see as a general fragmentation of family and community, a youth can entirely miss the phase of life in which one might naturally incorporate into oneself these traditional tools.¹³

This statement confirms that in the mid-1990s Richards perceived the social community in which he functioned, both as a person and as an artist, in terms of 'a general fragmentation of family and community'. It does not necessarily mean that he treated this view as a starting point for his work or that the 'danger' related to this 'fragmentation' was one of the goals of his artistic practice. Nevertheless, observations related to 'community' constituted one of the reflexive areas of the horizon of Richards's understanding of the world.

8 Grzegorz Ziółkowski, *Guslarz i eremita. Jerzy Grotowski: od wykładów rzymskich (1982) do paryskich (1997-1998)* (Wrocław: Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego, 2007), 296.

9 Richards, *Heart of Practice*, 83.

10 Richards, 83.

11 Richards, 83.

12 Richards, 42.

13 Richards, 43.

In his conversation with Kris Salata registered in Vienna on 6 November 2004, published as 'In the Territory of Something Third' in *Heart of Practice*, Richards declares:

On a certain level, the Workcenter research is a practical study of the inner possibilities that emerge from the ways human beings can connect in a performing situation. [...] If we give attention to the quality of the way we see another human being – seeing with an active comprehension, without fear – a special inner territory can begin to open in which the word 'we' is preponderant. You can notice this territory even in your daily life, in the special moments of a living and intimate conversation, for example, when the positive and negative of the person to whom you are speaking is not to your detriment. There's no power game, let's say. Instead, you are riding a wave of empathy, as if your partner's positive is your positive and his negative, your negative.¹⁴

Therefore, already in 2004 Richards perceived the issue of 'inner possibilities' of a human being in relation to the bond with another human being as constituting one of the levels at which the research in the Pontedera centre was conducted.

The most recent performative opus in the area of Art as vehicle created within the work of Focused Research Team in Art as Vehicle under the supervision and with the participation of Richards – with a score based on traditional African and Creole songs, excerpts from the Gospel of Thomas, the Acts of John, the *Emerald Tablet*, a text written by Rumi, a poem of the Bauls and original monologues emerging during the work – is described thus by its creators:

THE LIVING ROOM, a new opus in the domain of Art as vehicle, takes us home, to a place in which we welcome another. By starting from this fundamental action that can take place in a living room, we enter an investigation into how the potentialities of performance craft can both enrich and be enriched by daily inter-personal relations and realities. How can our room come alive? In what way can we call forth what is extra-ordinary in the quotidian? Within our meeting a structured and precise performance event unfolds, a living stream of actions based on work with songs of tradition, exploring what it takes to awaken oneself face to oneself, the other and the world.¹⁵

This description suggests that the research on Art as vehicle also includes exploration of issues related to awakening 'oneself face to oneself, the other and the world,' that is, to building direct relations between performers, and sometimes between performers and witnesses (as audiences are called in a terminology of Workcenter).

The opus, which refers not only in the title to the familial atmosphere of the meeting between family members and their guests, stimulates the pro-community associations. The entire scenography of *The Living Room*, which can be understood also as the guest room, is based on the rule of the meal prepared in advance by the performers and composed of local products and seasonal fruit typical to the place and season of a performance then offered to the witnesses, refers to the 'Smith's community

¹⁴ Richards, 131.

¹⁵ A note accompanying the presentations of *The Living Room* prepared by Focused Research Team in Art as Vehicle, supervised by Thomas Richards, in the materials of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, 2010.

feast'.¹⁶ There is a moment in *The Living Room* when the eating of food by Richards together with witnesses sitting at the table, which is a permanent prop of the opus, becomes a part of the performance. After the presentation, the doers sit down with their guests to feast and talk. *The Living Room* is an example of an action aimed at searching for ways to enter into a relationship with witnesses present during the performance and encourage them to participate in the event. The presence of this aspect in the works of the Workcenter is also confirmed by the event *Electric Party*, prepared by the Open Program Team. The performative structure based on Ginsberg poems and slave songs (as in the case of *I Am America*) develops in close contact with the witnesses gathered in a pub, and includes active participation in the action of the observers through engaging in conversations during short intermissions in the opus.

Richards's testimonies based on practising tools developed during his long-standing search in the area of Art as vehicle reveal the image justifying the claim that, in the course of its development, the Art as vehicle tools evolved towards acting in support of a community. Perhaps this belief grows on me in inverse proportion to the amount of discussion about community in narratives about the work in the Workcenter produced by its members, since "spoken of" community (more exactly: a community speaking of itself) is a contradiction in terms.¹⁷ 'Community can only be numb – or dead.'¹⁸

Performative tools of constituting a community developed in the Workcenter.

The question is: which of the tools of the Art as vehicle allow for supplementing the aspects of 'working on oneself' and one's artistic skills with the community dimension? Let us begin by enumerating these tools, following Richards:

Our work is not only related to very special ancient songs, but also to the creation of lines of little beats of human behavior, lines of performing details, and acting score with its specific tempo-rhythms, to the discovery and structuring of points of contact between acting partners, to the work on organic but structured flow of impulses, to forms of movement. It deals with the 'living word' (the approach of texts).¹⁹

If we add the recommendation formulated by Richards, following Grotowski, that '[w]e should every time *keep contact with our partner*'²⁰, which should prevent the 'dying' of a line of physical actions and keep the high level of spontaneity during action, we could risk a conclusion that the tool within Art as vehicle which allows for improving the quality of the bond between acting partners during the performative structure is the 'discovery and structuring of points of contact between acting partners'. I shall emphasise this once again: I do not mean to argue that it was the intention of Richards and/or Grotowski to shift the vectors of Art as vehicle towards practices supporting a community. I only intend to show that this practice is also present in Art as vehicle. This does not

16 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. by Saskya Iris Jain (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 55.

17 Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 2001), 12.

18 Bauman, 11.

19 Richards, *Heart of Practice*, 13.

20 Richards, *At Work with Grotowski*, 81.

entail the elimination of other aspects, such as individual 'work on one-self' or developing one's acting skills; on the contrary, they are all closely intertwined, as will be demonstrated in further reflections.

The place of 'another person' in developing the line of physical action

The perspective of building the communal relationship by means of the Art as vehicle tools is already present at the level of working on a physical action during the development of individual dramatic structure.

The starting point for the work on physical actions is evoking 'the cycle of the actor's personal associations'²¹ by recreating 'to the most minute actions and physical and vocal impulses'²² the 'memory' on which the score is based. In the period of Art as vehicle, Grotowski had explored the practices of body memory known already from the Laboratory Theatre period.

The memory can refer to the person of the doer. In Richards's testimonies, we find several examples of working with a 'memory' referring to the person developing it. For example, 'a young man B., who would later become a key member in the group I now lead,'"Downstairs Group"²³ – it was Mario Biagini²⁴ – and his work on his 'Acting proposition', which he builds 'around a childhood memory from the age of seven'.²⁵ 'B' here embodies himself at the age of seven.

In Richards's testimony, 'the pivotal session' with Grotowski in Objective Drama, which became 'the turning point in his [Grotowski's] relationship'²⁶ with him and his acting, occupies a special place:

Grotowski was watching a draft of *Main Action*, and I had a small fragment in which I was walking, carrying an object for another actor. Grotowski stopped us. He said there was something in my work, in what I had done. For me this was strange because I had just been walking. He said, no, there was organicity, the seeds of organicity in me in that movement. He asked what my association was as I walked, for whom I was walking... As he questioned me, a memory came to me about a time in my youth when I was carrying an object for my father in the hospital. I wrote down the memory in my notebook.²⁷

Richards apparently also embodies himself, but the difference with 'a young man B' lies in the fact that the score of physical action directed at 'another person' concentrates around the question: whom I was walking?

This question appears many times in Richards's testimonies, becoming the general recommendation. In his book *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*, Richards writes:

One danger for each type of actor is that the actions, after they are structured, 'die', and what were once physical actions become empty movements or gestures. This is the biggest danger and must be fought actively all along the way.

21 Grotowski, 123.

22 Grotowski, 122.

23 Richards, *At Work with Grotowski*, 78.

24 Thomas Richards said this to Tatiana Motta Lima in their conversation published in *Heart of Practice*, 79.

25 Richards, *At Work with Grotowski*, 78.

26 Richards, *Heart of Practice*, 4.

27 Richards, 4.

One must remember: What was I doing and to whom? Or even, For whom? This *for whom* or *whom* is the key.²⁸

Thus, already at the level of developing individual line of physical action the actor acts for 'another person'.

We also know Richards's testimony in which the developed 'memory' refers to a person other than the working actor. For example, 'young actor F':

The story was related to his father. One night his father had come home drunk from the bar, singing until he fell down and passed out. F. tried to remember the physical behavior of his father [...]. F., in his 'Acting proposition' around the memory of his father, was constructing the truthful line of physical behavior by remembering exactly what his father had done. He approached a discovery of the inner desires of his father, since true physical actions are always linked to desires or wishes. In the work of F., I began to see his father. I was not seeing F. 'play' his father, but rather execute the actions of his father, simply. Through him I started to see another person: F. was still there, but it was as if another person arrived through him.²⁹

Such testimonies lead to a conclusion that, at the level of individual development and repetition of horizontal score, physical actions can refer in at least three ways to 'another person' than the person performing it. The performing actor can refer to 'another person' through physical behaviour as directed towards it (respond by acting – 'whom I was walking?'); it can refer to 'another person' through embodying it (like 'young actor F.' embodied his father), approaching through the line of physical behaviour its 'wishes and desires'. And finally, if we notice the double identity of the doer, who is performing the score but 'was still there', while at the same time 'another person arrived through him', even if, like the 'young man B.', he performs himself from many years earlier, he still refers to 'another person'.

The conclusion that, even at the level of individual development of the line of physical action, a kind of direction towards super-individual intuition is strongly emphasised therefore seems justified. The question 'whom I was walking?' seems to sound as a kind of declaration of sacrifice inscribed in artistic practice, while the claim that 'a young actor F.' 'approached a discovery of the inner desires of his father', who he tried to embody, points to the potential of this particular kind of empathy accompanying artistic practice within Art as vehicle.

'A little closer to "we"' – the extra-individual aspect in the area of working on songs.

Until now, I have been focusing on an individual path, related to that which is situated in the horizontal dimension of Art as vehicle, that is, on the dimension of physical actions. Let us now enter the area of songs, group work and the vertical dimension, the 'inner action' elevating the doer 'to a level of energy more subtle or even toward the *higher connection*'.³⁰

²⁸ Richards, *At Work with Grotowski*, 81.

²⁹ Richards, 76–77.

³⁰ Grotowski, 125.

I would like to quote an extensive excerpt of Richards's narrative from *The Edge-Point of Performance*, in which he describes one moment in *Action* when he performs together with Biagini:

In *Action* you will see moments of contact between us in when we are both singing and performing and the 'inner action' starts to happen. When we are in this kind of contact, what is happening is not like when an actor might have some mental image that he projects on his partner [...]. [...] But, in these moments of connection with Mario, it is that I expect something from him and he expects something from me, something related to our vertical scores. If I am the leader of the song in that moment, he orients himself to my process in such a way that it becomes two people going on this journey, not just one. Or when he is the leader of a particular song, in that moment I orient myself around his process. And in some way, there is an induction that happens in me through following him, which in me then becomes active. Meaning, the leader initiates the process, the 'inner action', and the other follows and then is also fully going ahead with it inside himself while keeping the acting score and the song. This can create a strong energy reservoir between the two people, and what we can call the transformation of energy can seem to be no longer existing just in one or in the other, but in both and between. Even the feeling of the quality of the space between the two people can change. [...] In the beginning, when one is working toward this ascending, this transformation of energy, the perception of it might be that it is more related to something inside, as if something is tight around you and this flow were finding its way through knots, untying. And now in the work, in perception, it can be not necessarily just close around you, but all around you, not just inside but also around in a very ample way, around the physical frame. This can also englobe your partner and his doing, englobe his inside and his outside. It's like the two persons find a very special, unbroken contact in the space between them. And it can be said that it is almost a space between them which is ascending in quality of energy, and something subtle descending into it, into them. It's extremely complex. One might imagine that what I speak of is a very strong emotion. Well, emotions might be involved, but it's not just that. What happens in these moments is that one person is leading the process, and the other person is in a state of extreme openness to induction; and once that induction has begun, they go ahead in themselves actively with this transformation of energy, and the two are going together, keeping the contact, in tandem. It seems to me [...] that the energy seats are in us not just for discovering verticality, but also to help us perceive another, to help us perceive the state of another. In experience, in oneself they can be perceived as something like doorways when they're open, and when they're not, like walls. It's like with the 'heart'. Through the 'heart' one can begin to intuit a little bit of another's process, what is in another. Our 'heart' is a little closer to 'we', and not just 'I'. What is in the other? To also feel that other. Where is the other blocked? Where is the other open? If you have some knowledge of working with these songs, and with the stream of living impulses and lines of actions with them, and some, let's say, channel is becoming enough unblocked, and your partner is also at this point of practice, then this energy seats can become open doors, one facing the other. They can even become so open that in your perception as doer, where your 'I' begins and ends is not so clear any more. You can begin to discover that you are so connected, the place between you so filled, that what is entirely entering your acting partner is also entering you as a quality of energy. When there is this open door between his being and your being, when the 'inner

action' is being done simultaneously with this type of special horizontal contact, you can perceive that what is your 'I' and what you considered to be yourself 10 seconds ago was one thing, and that now it's another thing, much more ample, much more expanding, and it's also englobing your partner, and what is passing in your partner is also passing in you. Then, when the process is finished, when this kind of interaction is finished, you experience a sort of coming back to a habitual, more daily 'I'. You perceive that what was 'I' 10 seconds ago when this 'inner action' was happening was one thing, and now another.³¹

In my opinion, this statement is an intense testimony to an attempt to render the impression which accompanies the doer during the shift from 'I' to 'we' (the constitution of 'we') and then 'coming back to a habitual, more daily "I"'. I believe that Richards confirms, on the part of the doer, the impression of a high-quality mutual bond and support in striving after the individual and extra-individual 'transformation of energy', which we can recognise as witnesses of opuses created within the framework of Art as vehicle.

Let us use these observations to present the preliminary characteristics of conditions, in which the community with high-quality mutual bonds can be established. I suppose that these conditions may seem surprising, compared with the common idea about egalitarian coexistence. Notice, for example, this excerpt:

But, in these moments of connection with Mario, it is that I expect something from him and he expects something from me, something related to our vertical scores. If I am the leader of the song in that moment, he orients himself to my process in such a way that it becomes two people going on this journey, not just one. Or when he is the leader of a particular song, in that moment I orient myself around his process.

Surprisingly, the starting point for achieving the high-quality bond is not abandonment of one's expectations but, on the contrary, excessive expectations; it is not melting individual needs and desires in the commonality but, on the contrary, sustaining them. Only fulfilment of individual expectations seems to allow the doers to open themselves to a common experience, as though the condition for a good coexistence would lie in good conditions of individual lives. In this sense the communal dimension of Art as vehicle could be fulfilled only through preservation and cultivation of an individual dimension of 'working on oneself', which in practice means the development of mastering one's body, improvement of vocal skills, etc., that is, the development of technical skills. This is the way in which the individual, the common and the artistic blend in the same performative praxis, mutually conditioning themselves, mutually depending on themselves and influencing one another.

The stable 'foundation for individuality' as a condition for 'reopening a deeper relationship' with 'another person'

Let us return to the repeated excerpt from Richards's narrative. The process of establishing a high-quality mutual bond is also accompanied by not so obvious relationship, dynamic but based on hierarchy: the leader – I am oriented towards the leader. Seemingly these two dispositions – preserving one's expectations and orienting towards fulfilling someone else's expectations – are in contradiction. We should remember that

³¹ Richards, *Heart of Practice*, 19–21.

an action, like establishing a community, is a process. When I say that the relationship is 'dynamic but based on hierarchy', I have in mind the changeability within this hierarchy and simultaneous preservation of the hierarchical structure. Each of the doers is singing a song, thus holding a superior position, and supports another singer, putting himself in an inferior position.

The condition which must be met so that individual desires would not block the doers from following the song leaders and thus putting themselves in an inferior position is 'openness to induction', that is, the state of being ready to engage into an 'inner action' of the leader. This idea may seem to be risky, since it suggests a peculiar pre-condition of openness to community in order to enable establishing this community. Such doubts can be dispelled by referring to a part of *The Edge-Point of Performance* in which Richards talks about different foundations for individuality, issues related to their relationships to 'other people', the mechanism of a block which does not allow for openness to 'another person' and 'forgiveness':

For instance, let's say that, for some reason, as a young man I began to resent my father; unconsciously looking to free myself from his strong example, I developed a certain refutation towards him. I began to construct my own worth through my lack of acceptance of him, trying in this way to separate from him, to cut some tie. [...] Even though he could be miles away, I am linking him through my lack of acceptance. This creates in the 'heart', in the emotional seat, a contraction [...]. So it's not that as a very young man I can simply realize all this and say in my mind: 'Ah yes, I understand. I must release the negative linking, and I'm going to do it... now! I forgive, I forgive, I forgive'... and in reality nothing changes. It's something that seems to me can come at a specific moment in the development of a person, when it's as if what was linking that person to another on the level of this kind of blaming, and the leaning on that, can dissolve. You no longer base your individuality on it. So a knot, which can affect the readiness of an energy seat in a person, can really be an underlying basis of who a person considers himself to be. 'I consider myself to be someone really because that other one is no one'. And this phantasmagoria, until dissolved, can cut all deep contact with this other person. So in doing this work, on one level, a person can gradually be confronted with 'who they consider themselves to be'. These contractions are enhanced by hidden negative projections. You can't yell and scream at a contraction to decontract. It's more like trying to sense and feel the moment when you can no longer be dependent on that for your sense of self, for who you consider yourself to be. That can dissolve. [...] A very special type of acceptance and forgiveness can come flowing from that which is your life: 'You had certain necessities. How am I to know what you needed, what you didn't need? Who am I to be linking myself to you through my judgement of you in that way?'. And that kind of linking can dissolve the one of individuality based on 'I am somebody because you are wrong,' and some other kind of base or foundation for individuality begins to be. It can also reopen a deeper relationship with a person.³²

As the statement above may suggest, openness to 'another person' and entering into a deeper relation with it becomes possible, when we lay the foundation for our individualities on something not directly related to

³² Richards, *Heart of Practice*, 25–26.

other people's projections. Perhaps I would go too far, but I suggest my interpretation that this kind of self-acceptance, founding one's sense of self-esteem on the developed and, in some sense, self-confident 'I' (or an 'I' confident about itself), which may be achieved through self-development consisting of perfecting our peculiar qualities and skills but also development of the body and artistic skills, enables this 'extreme openness to induction', natural submission to the process of 'another person' and, as a result, 'going together, keeping the contact, in tandem', which I recognise as the state of establishing the 'we'. Dariusz Kosiński wrote that '*higher connection* is equivalent to the meeting with You [...] and that "You" is equivalent to the transformed total I'.³³ My intuition follows a similar direction. From this perspective, Art as vehicle can become a practice of self-development, offering the sense of individual 'self-confidence', which allows for opening to 'another person' unburdened with 'phantasmagorias' and, consequently, constitution of 'we', which is to say the community.

Dialectic of confrontation and affirmation as the tool of improving the quality of communal bonds

In Richards's statement quoted above, I noticed especially a sentence which can look as if it opposed the soft argument of the artist: 'in doing this work, on one level, a person can gradually be confronted with "who they consider themselves to be"'. This quote suggests that the practices developed in the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards are related not only to positive aspects of self-development, of constitution of individuality and the development of communal dispositions based on the high-quality bond between individuals, but also to confrontation with weaknesses, to negative aspects of complacency and false self-perception, that 'the positive and negative'³⁴ always go together and 'an experience of "affirmation"³⁵ is always in tandem with an experience of confrontation.

Thus far, while discussing the communal aspects of Art as vehicle, I have been focusing on the positive dimension of an organic, sustained development of an individual as a guarantor for openness to 'another person'. As much as this dimension is constitutive for the discussed issues of a totally communal aspect of Art as vehicle, as well as for any other aspect, it has to be accompanied by 'the sugar in the consommé, cutting against',³⁶ that is, qualities and actions aimed at completing the practice in the way that it would reveal the truth about life, which is composed of 'the aspect of "yes" and the aspect of "no"',³⁷ resulting from the fact that 'you have the "for" in you as you have the "against" in you'.³⁸ It has to be accompanied by something I would describe as the dialectic of confrontation and affirmation, directed at permeating relationships between human beings with real reciprocity, instead of 'adjusting them' by means of positive emotions, excluding all negative aspects which are, after all, natural elements of human relationships.

³³ Dariusz Kosiński, *Polski teatr przemiany* (Wrocław: Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego, 2007), 493.

³⁴ Richards, *Heart of Practice*, 131.

³⁵ Richards, 12.

³⁶ Richards, 32.

³⁷ Richards, 33.

³⁸ Richards, 33.

To make this phenomenon more clear, we should begin with the assurance formulated by Richards in his conversation with Tatiana Motta Lima:

First, in work we are never looking for negative emotions. And also, if they appear, we are not at all looking to incorporate them in the performing structures. Negative emotions such as jealousy or hate simply block in our work. They can block interior ascension. Secondly, we are absolutely not looking for negative acts, acts that go against one's conscience.³⁹

The confrontation, therefore, does not consist in developing and exploitation of negativity, but rather in something Richards calls the 'aspect of blasphemy'.⁴⁰ Richards elaborates this term while answering to Lisa Wolford's question related to the parts of *Action* which have more theatrical quality – developed as compositions rather than an organic stream of actions, fragments cutting against the wholeness of the opus. 'When we look at this aspect of "against" in *Action*, the sugar in the consommé, for us it's like letting both sides out. They're both there. You are conscious of both [...].'⁴¹ Just as in the course of *Action* the wholeness of the opus requires cutting against its organic development by means of composed fragments, in the process of establishing the bond 'an experience of "affirmation"⁴² must be fully achieved by blasphemy against it.

This happens, for example, in an intense section in *The Living Room* where the household, the supposed arena of action, becomes a 'scene' of struggle between doers, resulting from working out the sixteenth saying from the Gospel of Thomas, which says: 'Indeed, if there are five in a house: three will be against two, and two against three, the father against the son, and the son against the father. And they will stand alone.'⁴³ The confrontation between the doers seems to overcome or rework the antagonism between them in order to permeate their relationship with wholeness.

Similarly, in the structure of *I Am America* focused on the figure of America and 'its children', communities living there, the critique of the culture of that continent moves into the foreground and sounds not only in actions, but also in Ginsberg's poetry. However, since 'A truth never appertains to Critique',⁴⁴ 'the aspect "against"' is never sufficient to build the wholeness of interactions in the world. This critique is overcome by contrasting performance based on joyful singing and actions aimed at common performing, supporting one another in singing and a high-quality of the bond between performers, which are a peculiar blasphemy through positivity.

Activating 'the aspect of blasphemy' may also be achieved through introducing elements of humour to the organic flow of actions generating the doer's identification with the performed action, which – though this

39 Richards, 89.

40 Richards, 32.

41 Richards, 33

42 Richards, 12.

43 'The Gospel of (according to) Thomas', by Didymus Jude Thomas, trans. by Wim van den Dungen, Antwerp, 1997, accessed 26 August 2016, <http://www.sofiatopia.org/equiaeon/thomas.htm>.

44 Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. by Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 109.

is not directed at cutting against the organicity of the process of developing the action – can fulfil the function of distancing from this process, that is, activating the non-identical quality.

A certain sense of humor can be quite valuable. A lack of identification can be helpful in moments in any performing situation, since one can always make mistakes. A distance filled with subtle humor, inner laughter and joy, can be extremely important inside an opus in order that inevitable difficulties pass with time. If a momentary problem fastens onto you – something occurs that you don't like, that you consider a mistake in yourself or in others – it can affect the quality of the upcoming time. A movement of humor inside might be like the reaction of a person with a lot of experience who, through a conscious way of looking, releases identification with a momentary difficulty. Inside an opus it can help prevent a problem from growing by disposing of its seed.⁴⁵

The dialectic of confrontation and affirmation, conferring on practices aiming at improving the quality of communal bonds the truth that results from permeating relationships between human beings with all aspects – positive and negative – and which have to be reworked to meet the demand of the real community, seems to grant a special status to current works created at the Workcenter. Not only because this dialectic helps to avoid 'enchanted' the community through exposing only positive aspects of being together, but also because it imparts to these works created at the Workcenter the multi-layered character of answering fundamental problems of the world. Contemporary art is obsessed with 'finitude, body, cruelty, suffering and death' ⁴⁶ in response to an 'ideology of happiness' commonly present and supported by market instruments. Artists react to this by trying to reach areas of reality hidden from our sight by masters of the remote control of sensations, areas which contain the painful truth about the individual and the common: the deficiency of an individual body, cruelty of oppressors and pain of the oppressed, complex sexual identities and interactions and antagonism between social groups, which constitute the real mechanism of emerging of the temporary communal constellations. Obviously, 'a critical position about the ideology of happiness is an artistic necessity, but it's also an artistic necessity to see it as a new vision, a new light, something like a positive new world'.⁴⁷ The dialectic of confrontation and affirmation is a response to the indispensability of both attitudes.

Translated by Monika Bokiniec

This paper is a section of the research project 'Art as Vehicle of Community: Communal Aspects of Different Theatre Practices, with Special Focus on the Current Works of Artists Gathered at the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards (Pontedera, Italy), Socio-Artistic Actions at Łaźnia Nowa Theater (Nowa Huta, Kraków, Poland) and Contemporary Polish and International Theatre Performances', conducted for the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute

⁴⁵ Richards, *Heart of Practice*, p. 75.

⁴⁶ Alain Badiou, *Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art*, www.lacan.com/frameXXIII7.htm.

⁴⁷ Badiou, *Fifteen Theses...*

in Warsaw from 2009 to 2012. One version of this paper was published by the on-line journal *Performer* (2/2011) as *Sztuka jako wehikuł (2)* [*Art as vehicle (2)*].

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ABSTRACT

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Art as Vehicle of Community: The Works of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards in Pontedera, Italy, from 2009 to 2012

The paper begins with observations made by the author in 2009 about the works created in the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards in Pontedera, under the supervision of Mario Biagini and Thomas Richards. The author claims that in the performative structures developed at the time, experiencing community became the primary aspect, and the most important tools to build those structures were those designed to create a high-quality social bond. The article includes the analysis of Thomas Richards' statements, documents accompanying the works created in the Workcenter and performative opuses themselves from the point of view of emerging communal perspectives within the development of the tools of 'Art as vehicle', the final stage of Jerzy Grotowski's work. The article also attempts to define the attitude towards working with this theatrical material which could enable influence upon the quality of social community.