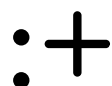


**Mateusz Chaberski**

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in Site-specific Performances in the Performance  
Scholar's Laboratory

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**Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego**

**Mateusz Chaberski**

## The (Syn)aesthetic Experience of Participants in Site-specific Performances in the Performance Scholar's Laboratory<sup>1</sup>

I would like to begin this article with an anecdote that illustrates the methodological problems faced by a researcher of performance in tackling the question of the experience of a recipient-participant in site-specific performances. A short time ago, I applied to a Polish research body offering funding for interdisciplinary studies in the humanities, with a research project proposing to investigate the assemblage-based and affective experience of participants in contemporary culture. In the outline of my planned research submitted to the committee, I argued that strategies of contemporary artists which encourage increased involvement of the recipient in the artistic action have not yet led scholars to develop a new language for describing the work that would address the ontological status of the participant in the event in question.

To address this gap, I drew on the conclusions of Josephine Machon, the British performance scholar, who coined the term '(syn)aesthetics' which encompasses a host of contemporary site-specific and immersive performances that create a multisensory and visceral experience of participants.<sup>2</sup> Following Machon's playful use of brackets, I decided to shift perspective from questions of aesthetics that she asks to questions of reception I consider vital in contemporary performance studies. Therefore, I formulated the conception of (syn)aesthetic experience that emerges from assemblage and affective links between individual sensual modalities on one hand and on the other the intellectual experience associated with seeking to attach a specific meaning to artistic actions. Yet this wasn't enough. One can rightly claim that every participation in artistic event is (syn)aesthetic in nature. If so, why do we hear virtually all contemporary theatre and performance scholars still using the terms 'viewers' or 'spectators' as if they were transparent and innocent concepts? In order to avoid this confusion, in the context of the multisensory recipient-participant experience of the performances I was interested in, I proposed rejecting entirely the terms 'viewer' and 'spectator' – which clearly assume an oculocentric model of reception of art – in favour of the more precise term *(syn)aesthete*. My objective was for an experience which combines sensory perceptions with intellectual processes of

<sup>1</sup> This article draws upon sections of Mateusz Chaberski's book *Doświadczenie (syn)estetyczne. Performatywne aspekty przedstawień site-specific* (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Josephine Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* (London: Palgrave, 2009).

interpretation, to become the key characteristic shaping our thinking about the recipient in every artistic event. Although at first this might seem quite odd and distractive, in what is to follow I will be using the terms 'participants', 'recipients' and '(syn)aesthetes' interchangeably and, hence, I will refer to their experience as (syn)aesthetic experience.

During the interview that would decide whether my project would be accepted, I was asked one question that seems particularly significant in the context of the (syn)aesthetic experience that I'm addressing here. Asked by a member of the committee who was a scholar of cultural studies, it went something like this: 'I'm interested in what it is you actually want to research? After all, the experience of the person whom you would like to call a (syn)aesthete is transient, and disappears when the artistic event comes to an end. Afterwards there are only recordings and documents in which this experience is no longer there'. His argument was clearly in favour of the view anchored in cultural studies, which sees performance as an ephemeral artistic phenomenon. This view excludes material and non-material traces of the action as integral part of performance making it possible to reconstruct past performances. From this perspective, (syn)aesthetic experience becomes as transitory as the performance itself, and any attempt to analyse it inevitably leads to false conclusions and over-interpretations, as any such attempt is based solely on various mediations.

I responded to these arguments by questioning the transient nature of experience, pointing to some of the latest performative theories. The deep sigh of resignation the cultural-studies scholar let out made it obvious that he was not convinced by my reasoning.

My answers plainly did not persuade him – '(syn)aesthetic experience' as a category of description of cultural phenomena proved simply too imprecise to merit the status of a subject of interdisciplinary research in the humanities.

But I don't wish this anecdote to be interpreted as resentment of a young scholar whose project was rejected. It seems to me that the cultural-studies scholar's question needs answering in order to speak about (syn)aesthetic experience in the context of site-specific performance.

At its root it is a specific way of thinking about the experience of a recipient of culture as such an intangible subjective phenomenon that it escapes any objectifying scientific discourse. It is founded on the essentialist view that there is such a thing as a 'real' experience of a recipient, its duration limited by the beginning and the end of the artistic event. This makes impossible any attempt to reconstruct the experience on the basis of various kinds of recordings and documents concerning the event.

In this article I shall endeavour to oppose this idea by arguing that the experience of a (syn)aesthete preserves its affective character<sup>3</sup> even when the performance researcher reconstructs it on the basis of his/her collected materials left after a given performance. To this end, I shall first refer to the concept of the scientific experiment proposed by the

<sup>3</sup> As the term *affect* is frequently (over)used in contemporary humanities, I must emphasise that I'm not referring here to merely emotional reactions to performance. I'm rather interested in affect defined by Brian Massumi after Spinoza as the impersonal 'power to affect and to be affected'. See Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (London/Malden: Polity Press, 2015).

French sociologist of science Bruno Latour. He claims that the objects of scientific study are constructed as a result of the interaction between the scientist, the technologies used for the research and the material it analyses.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on Latour's findings, I will then look for a precise answer to the cultural-studies scholar's question and examine the ontological status of the (syn)aesthete's experience in the context of the debate among contemporary-performance scholars on transience as a distinctive characteristic of performative arts.

I have the sense that, in the context of contemporary practices that increasingly involve reproducing and reconstructing performative actions from the past, there is a need for a modification in thinking about performance as a fugitive and intangible cultural phenomenon. In this context, I will make use of the theoretical conclusions of Rebecca Schneider, whose *Performing Remains* argues convincingly that performative action does not pass by irrevocably but is based on reconstruction and reinterpretation of the past.<sup>5</sup> I will then refer Schneider's conceptions to the analysis of Jan Klata's production *H.* (2004), presented in a now-defunct hall in the Gdańsk Shipyard where the Solidarity strikes began in 1980. This example was not chosen by chance; I did not take part in this site-specific performance and know it only from audiovisual documents and descriptions. I shall, however, try to show that the experience of the (syn)aesthetes in *H.*, performatively recreated in my performance-scholar laboratory, retains its character in terms of assemblage and affect.

In Latour's essay 'From Fabrication to Reality: Pasteur and His Lactic Acid Ferment' (1999), he questions the conviction that the fundamental objective of science is to secure access to objectively existing essential reality. According to him, scientific research in fact involves various kinds of transformation of the world resulting in production of specific matters of fact and construction of scientific facts.<sup>6</sup> Yet he categorically resists the constructivist way of thinking about reality, i.e. treating it solely as an artificial creation that develops as the result of scientists' activity. Latour reserves equally strong criticism for scientific realism, which assumes that the objective of science boils down to explaining reality. The French sociologist questions this type of thinking about science, which introduces a binary opposition between artificially produced scientific procedures and supposedly true reality. He goes on to demonstrate the falseness of this opposition, analysing the laboratory as a space in which we witness during a scientific experiment various types of interaction between scientist, the material studied and various technological apparatuses used in the research.<sup>7</sup> A characteristic feature of these interactions is the fact that a scientist cannot be assigned a superior role in shaping the course of a scientific study: various material circumstances have active influence on its working: from the research material itself via the research instruments to the diverse codified ways of recording the research results obtained. Outlined in this way, the effect of a research process is the

4 Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

5 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011).

6 See Latour, 'From Fabrication to Reality. Pasteur and His Lactic Acid Ferment' in *Pandora's Hope*, pp. 113–144 (p. 114).

7 See Latour, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, trans. by Steve Woolgar (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

emergence of a certain state of affairs which the scientific community, following extremely precise verification procedures, either acknowledges as a scientific fact or rejects as contrary to the accepted protocols of scientific procedure.

In *Pandora's Hope*, Latour demonstrates in detail the course of the process outlined above, using the example of Louis Pasteur's text which describes his work on the process of fermentation of lactic acid. The 19th-century scientist discovered that the active agent responsible for this kind of fermentation is yeast cells. As Latour explains, this discovery was contrary to the state of knowledge at the time – in fact, more broadly, to the accepted way of thinking about the world. He writes that '[f]ermentation had been explained in a purely chemical way, without the intervention of any living thing by an appeal to the degradation of inert substances'.<sup>8</sup> Latour argues convincingly that, as a result of Pasteur's trials and changes observed including sedimentation of the residue developing in the fermentation process, as well as observation of this residue under the microscope, the ontological status of the object of his research gradually changed. According to Latour, by using the appropriate laboratory procedures, one can jump from a non-existent entity to a general class, passing through a stage in which the entity, constructed from fluid sensory data, is treated as a description of the action before finally changing into a complex entity similar to a plant, with a place in well-established taxonomy.<sup>9</sup>

What seems the most important characteristic of this scientific experiment is the fact that during it 'Pasteur and the ferment mutually exchange and enhance their properties'.<sup>10</sup> Which is to say that the physical attributes of the yeast which make it act in specific biochemical reactions helped the researcher make discoveries in a certain way, as the laboratory procedures used permitted the yeast to form a fully fledged entity. In this way, Latour shatters the binary opposition between an object of scientific research and a subject, treating them as equal actors influencing the result of the study. In this understanding, the laboratory procedures and techniques used to produce scientific facts, previously treated as artificial, do not distance researchers from reality but in fact, paradoxically, strengthen the ontological status of the object of their research. Latour therefore uses the metaphor of sight to claim that during an experiment there are at play various types of filters applied to the object of the research. At the same time, during laboratory research, he continues, 'far from opposing filters to an unmediated gaze, it is as if the more filters there were the clearer the gaze was'.<sup>11</sup> In other words, scientific procedures employed in the laboratory lead to the revelation of entirely new characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation, which frequently change its ontological status diametrically.

How can Latour's findings on Pasteur's laboratory contribute to the analysis of (syn)aesthetic experience? To answer this question, we must take a closer look at the category of scientific experiment which Latour adopts.

8 Latour, p. 117.

9 Latour, p. 122.

10 Latour, p. 124.

11 Latour, p. 137.

To interpret the term 'experiment' used by Latour in his writings, I see it as very important to consider the language in which we read his texts. Most of the sociologist's work is known outside France from Catherine Porter's masterly translations into English (also the basis for the Polish translations). The meaning of the word 'experiment' in English is confined to strictly defined practices employed in experimental sciences. If we look at Latour's original French, however, we learn that this 'experiment' is in fact rendered as *expérience*. The semantic range of this word encompasses procedures used in the laboratory as well as experience understood as the sum of knowledge and skills acquired as a result of observation and one's own experiences.

Yet my choice of this basis for the term in question is not solely about a linguistic curiosity. In his *Alien Agency*, the American performance scholar Chris Salter, points to this dual meaning of *expérience* – 'that of experiment or speculation and that of experience, of something that *happens* to us'.<sup>12</sup> Based on this, we can venture the thesis that an experiment – or, more broadly, every type of scientific research – is distinctly experiential in character. Salter argues that we face an 'affective and improvisatory assemblage of conditions that operates on and transforms us, does something else'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, his definition of *expérience* conforms to the concept of experience as an affective assemblage of many different types of experience.

We therefore arrive at a method of studying (syn)aesthetic experience which, according to Josephine Machon, is as affective in nature as experience itself. To avoid terminological chaos, I shall use the French term *expérience* to describe this method in order to stress the essential affective character of phenomena produced in the laboratory of the performance scholar. From the perspective of Salter's conclusions, let us therefore try to treat an experiment as a model of *expérience* allowing the experience of a (syn)aesthete in the site-specific performance to be scrutinised.

The experimental research procedure described by Latour aptly illustrates the *expérience* of the researcher of performance studying (syn)aesthetic experience in a site-specific performance. To understand the similarity between an experiment and an analysis of the (syn)aesthete's experience, let us once again look at Pasteur's laboratory as described by Latour, specifically at what an experiment meant for him:

The artificiality of the laboratory does not run counter to its validity and truth; its obvious immanence is actually the source of its downright transcendence. How could this apparent miracle be obtained? Through a very simple setup that has baffled observers for a long time and that Pasteur beautifully illustrates. The experiment creates two planes: one in which the narrator [the scientist] is active, and a second in which the action is delegated to another character, a nonhuman one. An experiment shifts out action from one frame of reference to another. Who is the active force in this experiment? Both Pasteur and his yeast. More precisely, Pasteur acts *so that* the yeast acts alone. [...] Pasteur creates a stage in which he does not have to create anything.

<sup>12</sup> Chris Salter, *Alien Agency: Experimental Encounters with Art in the Making* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015) p. 241.

<sup>13</sup> Salter.

He develops gestures, glasswork, protocols, so that the entity, once shifted out, becomes independent and autonomous.<sup>14</sup>

Like Pasteur, the performance scholar works in a kind of laboratory, making use of certain scientific procedures with the aim of creating a stage on which the experience of the (syn)aesthete participating in a given site-specific performance can exist and reveal its affective potential. At the same time, researchers of (syn)aesthetic experience are constantly oscillating between these two planes of analysis. On one hand, they are the narrator of the story of the (syn)aesthete's experience, and can therefore apparently create it as they see fit. On the other, the performance scholar makes continual use of concrete material recordings of the experience which are extremely important in terms of how the (syn)aesthetic experience they describe is formed. Those studying site-specific performances collect available documents and audiovisual recordings of a specific artistic event. Should they know that it will be hard to come by such materials, they document the performance themselves and gather various artefacts related to it. Furthermore, an integral part of the research is the widely varying records of the (syn)aesthetic experience, including what the artists have to say, reviews by theatre critics or blog posts of participants in specific events.

As in Latour, each of the types of recording a (syn)aesthetic experience that I mention constitutes a further frame of reference that diametrically changes the nature of the experience in question. But we cannot say that using various kinds of mediations distances the performance scholar from a 'true' (syn)aesthetic experience. In fact, the opposite is true. Following Latour's findings, we must acknowledge that any frame of reference in which a performance scholar places the (syn)aesthete's experience equips that experience with entirely new characteristics that strengthen its ontological status.<sup>15</sup> So what proves to be the result of the scholar's experiment? According to Latour, as a result of Pasteur's experiments 'we will find two (partially) new actors [...]: a new yeast and a new Pasteur!'<sup>16</sup> In terms of (syn)aesthetic experience, we can speak not so much of new entities being produced, as new ways (again, partially new) of experiencing reality.

From the point of view of the method of examining (syn)aesthetic experience outlined in this way, let us look more closely at the question of the ontological status of performance, before investigating procedures employed within the specific *expérience* that I conducted.

Having chosen the above method for researching a (syn)aesthete's experience, we must reflect critically on the conception established in the performative field of such actions being artistic events that exist, to use Herbert Blau's term, 'at the vanishing point'.<sup>17</sup> In the colloquial language of the cultural-studies scholar mentioned above, this means that the performance acts exclusively in the present and its transience and uniqueness makes any attempt to record it futile. This has been theorised by, among others, the influential performance scholar Peggy Phelan, in her

<sup>14</sup> Latour, pp. 129–130. Emphases added.

<sup>15</sup> See p. 126.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 124.

<sup>17</sup> Herbert Blau, *Take Up the Bodies: Theatre at the Vanishing Point* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

*Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993),<sup>18</sup> in which she argues that performance is an artistic event of a temporary nature and therefore resists any efforts to reproduce it. This is because performance, Phelan argues, does not make use of metaphors rendering the performer's physical actions an expression of a particular idea. The ultimate point of reference in performance art is always the material 'here and now' of the performer and of participants in such artistic actions. Furthermore, according to Phelan, the unreproducible performance 'disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control'.<sup>19</sup> This means that the transitory performative action triggers an ephemeral experience of participation in its beholder, which supposedly escapes any rigid interpretative framework. In light of research procedures cited above, do Phelan's conclusions still accurately describe processes taking place in this type of artistic events?

To question Phelan's conception, we need look no further than reenactments, a practice growing in popularity among contemporary performers that involves recreating artistic actions from the past. An example might be Marina Abramović's cycle of appearances in 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In Abramović's series *Seven Easy Pieces*, the artist reenacted seven different performances including Joseph Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) and her own performance *Lips of Thomas* (1975). Abramović treated the widely scattered, incomplete documentation from these performances as a script for the new artistic action she was creating. The result was an event somewhere between performance and representation. It is hard to say whether in a given moment Abramović's physical actions are self-referential, or whether they possess a kind of *signifiée* in the form of historical works of art. On one hand, the artist's actions represent an element of performance played out 'here and now', in which the performer's physicality plays an especially important role. On the other, though, *Seven Easy Pieces* can be interpreted as a traditional theatrical play in which Abramović becomes an actor playing the role of other performers. In the latter case, her performances of the work of Beuys, Acconci and Naumann play the role that the text of a drama plays in the theatre, as the basis for the director's conception. Abramović's performance thus appears to lose its exclusively phenomenal character, becoming a collection of symbols with concrete reference points.

Let us explore how the ambivalent ontological status of reenactment outlined here can change our ideas regarding the ontology of performance. Rebecca Schneider, the American scholar of performance, attempted to reformulate the definition of performance to fit the perspective of contemporary reenactment practices in her book *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, mentioned above. Yet rather than exploring contemporary performance art, she is more interested in analysing a phenomenon that is extremely popular in the U.S., that of reconstructing Civil War battles. Two factors make the research material Schneider uses especially important in terms of (syn) aesthetic experience in site-specific performance. First, her theoretical conclusions provide insight into the mechanisms of production of performativity beyond the context of the narrow definition of performance

<sup>18</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>19</sup> Phelan, p. 148.



art used in Blau's and Phelan's reflections. Schneider's conceptions can thus also be applied to analysis of any kind of theatrical performances, photography or film. Second, she gives particular attention to the experience of participants in performances she describes, perceiving them at the same time as naive reproducers with a blind belief in the ideologised image of the Civil War transmitted by organisers of such events. Schneider treats the words of one re-enactor seriously: 'The Civil War isn't over. And that's why we fight. We fight to keep the past alive.'<sup>20</sup>

In other words, participants in these performances do not regard their performative action as ephemeral and momentary but as giving them access to (a full version of) the past. According to Schneider, however, this access is not based on certainty as to the course of past events. Rather, the basis is contact with material traces of the past ridden with mistakes and wrong interpretations. I will use the conclusions which she draws from the words of the quoted re-enactor to explain the status of the (syn) aesthetic experience as a subject of interest among performance scholars.

The conception of a performative action formulated from the perspective of contemporary reenactment practices is at odds with the idea of linear time, in which individual events pass by irrevocably and a return to the past is viewed solely as a common device in science fiction. For Schneider, reenactment is a kind of time travel in which events from the past are played out anew. This leads her to propose her own conception of performance, based on Gertrude Stein's theories on theatre. Stein wrote that while watching a play we are subjected to 'syncopated time',<sup>21</sup> meaning that characters from the past can constantly be invoked and past events replayed. This means we cannot state unequivocally that a drama takes place 'here and now', as the ontological structure of an artistic event also consists of the time of the action of the performance, as well as another exhibition of the same dramatic text from the past.

Schneider comments on this aspect of time in the context of reenactments by writing that the event:

pulses with a kind of living afterlife in an ecstasy of variables, a million insistent if recalcitrant possibilities for return (doubling as possibilities for error). The zillion details of the act of interpretation in an act of live repetition make the pastness of the past both palpable and a very present matter.<sup>22</sup>

This means that, regarding the concept of returning time, a performance proves not so much a transient and passing work of art as an event played out between present and past, or, in other words, between a specific event from the past and various remains left behind. Rather than uniqueness, which assume that an action will never return in the same form, Schneider accepts that the essential characteristic of a performative action is its ability to return in diverse remnants both material and non-material, subject to diverse performative practices, both research related and artistic.

In order to fully understand what the return of a performative action entails in this context, we must first examine the nature of these remains to which Schneider refers.

<sup>20</sup> Schneider, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 93.

<sup>22</sup> Schneider, pp. 29–30.

In her book, she effectively resists the essentialist way of thinking about various types of remains of performance as traces of the past allowing it to be reconstructed. Referring to Jacques Derrida, Schneider argues that this approach to remains sustains the dominant position of the archive as a specific way of accessing the past. An archive reduces the ontological status of a document, object or record of a performative action to media offering efficient access to the past. Therefore, she writes – paradoxically, I might add – the traditionally ephemeral aspect of a (performative) event is reinforced, and thus we view the document, object and record as remains of the past. In this way, we have grown accustomed to perceiving the status of an archived object as a vanishing trace that remains after a transient artistic action. By using this logic of the trace, which stresses the transience of a performance subjected in the archive to mechanisms of regulation, stabilisation and institutionalisation, we forget that it is the archive itself that gives rise to our belief in the transience of the performance.<sup>23</sup>

As we can see, it is not Schneider's intention to question the 'archival' manner of thinking about traces of the past. She therefore takes issue in this aspect with Diana Taylor, probably the best-known critic of the archive, who contrasts use of archive documents to access the past with the repertoire, meaning that which 'enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge'.<sup>24</sup> According to Schneider, Taylor is arguing for acceptance of a method of researching performative actions that would mean its ephemeral nature could be understood without the need to make use of concrete material records of the past. Schneider proposes abandoning the binary opposition between trace and performance, meanwhile, by revealing the performative potential of the archive itself as a space in which various kinds of affective reconfigurations of the past take place. She claims that the archive too offers this kind of affective access to the past, which is why she speaks of various 'architectures of access' to the past rather than of two opposing ways of reaching past events. According to Schneider, each mode of access to the past triggers a concrete experience of the researcher accompanied by acquisition of knowledge.

Architectures of access (the physical aspect of books, bookcases, glass display cases, or even the request desk at an archive) place us in particular experiential relations to knowledge. Those architectures also impact the knowledge imparted. Think of it this way: the same detail of information can sound, feel, look, smell, or taste radically different when accessed in radically different venues or via disparate media (or when not told in some venues but told in others). In line with this configuration performance is the mode of any architecture or environment of access (one performs a mode of access in the archive; one performs a mode of access at a theatre; one performs a mode of access on the dance floor; one performs a mode of access on a battlefield). In this sense, too, performance does not disappear. In the archive, the performance of access is

<sup>23</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 20.

a ritual act that, by occlusion and inclusion, scripts the depreciation of (and registers as disappeared) other modes of access.<sup>25</sup>

This extremely sensory passage from Schneider's work leads therefore to the conclusion that archival research on various kinds of performance remains is just as performative in nature as its subject. So the performance scholar's archive conceived in this way demonstrates striking similarities to Latour's laboratory model described earlier, in which specific states of affairs are produced rather than a mere reflection of an objectively existing reality. In this sense, researching a (syn)aesthetic experience of historic site-specific performances in which the researcher did not take part might be seen as a kind of reenactment. Rather like the Civil War reconstruction participant quoted above, the scholar, on the basis of the available documentary materials, experiences the past artistic event anew. Importantly, though, depending on the selected mode and medium of access to the past, he or she produces an entirely different (syn)aesthetic experience, only reinforcing the affective potential of this experience. As in the case of *expérience*, the archival research follows a trajectory whereby consequent changes of research methods strengthen the ontological status of the subject in question. Contrary therefore to the claim of the cultural-studies scholar, the (syn) aesthete's experience can be examined equally well in reference to historical events which a researcher can access only by means of specific material and non-material remains.

Let me now invite you to my own performance scholar's laboratory to illustrate how Schneider's (and Latour's) conceptions may guide an analysis of a particular experience of a (syn)aesthete in a site-specific performance. To show that, I shall take the aforementioned example of Jan Klata's play *H.* from 2004. It was presented in a dilapidated hall at the Gdańsk Shipyard. This choice in the context of Schneider's conclusions is not accidental. The play is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which plays a significant role in her theory of performance. For Schneider, this drama is a kind of template for contemporary thinking about a performative event, which abandons the binary opposition between the ephemeral nature of such an event and its endurance in various types of records. She writes in *Performing Remains* that 'Hamlet is mounting a "live" performance to function as record – troubled as that record may be – for a prior event (his father's murder) otherwise recorded only by the testimony of a phantom, caught, as it were, in the meantime of the live. The problem of the record in relation to the live here slips away from tidy distinction.'<sup>26</sup>

To put it another way, for Schneider the performance *Hamlet* organises and calls *The Mouse-trap* becomes a kind of reenactment of the murder committed by Claudius. In Shakespeare's play, at the same time, the recreation of this event is distinctly political in nature, meant to serve the protagonist as proof that his uncle is guilty of fratricide. In this respect, Klata's *H.*, staged in the extremely symbolic space of the Gdańsk Shipyard, can also be interpreted as a reenactment of what had taken place not so long before with the change of the political guard in Poland, when the communist system was replaced by liberal democracy.

<sup>25</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 104.

<sup>26</sup> Schneider, p. 89.

Yet the analogy outlined here between *Hamlet* and *H.* goes further still. Like Shakespeare's protagonist, Klata uses his site-specific performance to attempt to persuade the (syn)aesthetes taking part in it of his critical appraisal of the new system. The shipyard hall itself in which the play took place contributed to this interpretation. Shortly after the production's final performance by Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk, that hall was demolished. As a result, the interpretation of Klata's work that viewed it as an ephemeral performative event with a markedly critical potential was preserved. Even today, *H.* continues to be viewed as a bitter diagnosis of post-1989 socio-political changes in Poland, the symbol of which – the Gdańsk Shipyard – is gradually being consigned to history, as with the physical destruction of the building.

From today's perspective, though, when the analysis of the (syn)aesthetic experience in *H.* is reduced solely to analysis of all kinds of records of it, the play can reveal new performative aspects. I shall therefore use Schneider's model of the performative archive to create an *expérience* whereby examining various types of records of the performance makes it possible to produce a new (syn)aesthetic experience in *H.*. One that works not so much to cause (syn)aesthetes to look critically upon the transformation in Poland as to use specific performative strategies to impose on them a kind of compulsion to remember. The compulsion applies both to the (syn)aesthetes actually taking part in the 2004 performance and to those accessing Klata's play today through various remains.

To see ways in which the (syn)aesthete's experience works in *H.*, the first stage of my *expérience* is analysing Katarzyna Adamik's 2006 video recording of the performance.<sup>27</sup> I choose this trace of Klata's production as it makes possible many different modes of access to the past. According to the logic of the trace, which Schneider wrote about, Adamik's film can be interpreted as both a material and a non-material remnant from *H.* This is because it exists both in the material form of a DVD as well as online at the Ninateka website, where the National Audiovisual Institute makes available digital versions of significant works of contemporary Polish culture. In thinking about *H.*, however, I do not treat Adamik's film exclusively as a document that can be used to recreate the course of the play in its 'original' form. I am more interested in its ability to record the specific (syn)aesthetic experience, which can then be subjected to various types of performative reconstructions.

In order to explain this function of Adamik's film as well as other records of (syn)aesthetic experience, we just have to refer to Schneider's ideas on the performative potential of the photographic medium as a record of a specific action in the past. In *Performing Remains*, she analyses the infamous photographs from the Abu Ghraib detention facility, which capture detainees being baited with dogs, led naked on leashes and dressed up in costumes designed to humiliate them. The photos show smiling soldiers cheerfully pointing at their brutally tortured prisoners. Schneider notes that these pictures are not just a record of the shocking treatment dealt out during the American war on terror. She also claims that the gesture of pointing was recorded at the moment the photo was taken as an element of future re-presentation before the eyes of the picture's beholder, just as a script contains directions as to its future

<sup>27</sup> *H.*, dir, Jan Klata, recording by Katarzyna Adamik, Gdańsk, 18–21 July 2006, DVD.

realisation on stage. We can therefore say that a humiliating gesture from the past, like a theatre script, is replayed before 'you' when you are in fact looking at these photographs.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, we cannot say that the Abu Ghraib torture and the humiliating gestures that went with them belong to the past once and for all. They are played out anew (always differently) at the moment when somebody watches them. By the same token, we are unable to state categorically that the experience of the (syn)aesthetes in *H.* disappeared with the demolition of the hall where the play was performed 'here and now'. The experience I am interested in arises above all in the space of the archive, where it is both subject to a certain institutional control and can be performatively reconstructed in various ways. In analysing Adamik's film, let us therefore first examine the (syn)aesthetic experience actualised in this way.

The beginning of the film recording of *H.* shows clearly that the play starts in front of the shipyard hall. This directs the attention both of the (syn)aesthetes convened there and of the viewers of the film to the building's majestic bulk and the surrounding post-industrial landscape. Hamlet and Horatio use golf clubs to hit 'balls' that are in fact wooden cubes, which make a dull thud as they bounce off the iron gate leading into the hall. The echo reverberating around the empty space acts as a sign to the (syn)aesthetes that this is a place that has been inactive for years. The recording also highlights the contrast between the abandoned hall and nearby scaffolding, where men are still working. This contrast is also emphasised by red-and-white barrier tape, which – like a curtain in a traditional theatre – serves to delimit the space, separating (syn)aesthetes from the shipyard entrance. When Horatio breaks the tape, along with him we enter a space comprising a once-vibrant workplace that has fallen into ruin: the shipyard as symbol of Solidarity and the Shakespearean Elsinore.

If we treat this film sequence as a prologue to the play, imposing a certain manner of interpretation of the whole, it turns out that the dominant element of the (syn)aesthetic experience is physical experience of being in the space of the Gdańsk Shipyard, making it possible to explore it freely. This is made clear by pictures from the camera recording the play, which first accompanies the (syn)aesthetes as they enter the hall then pans around the harsh interiors, rusty scaffolding and dusty machines. The lack of a distinct point of focus for the director thus reproduces the dispersion of attention characteristic of (syn)aesthetic experience. Nevertheless, it seems that the experience of the (syn)aesthetes participating in *H.* and those watching Adamik's recording produced in this way brings with it a very specific model of memory which has a major influence on the interpretation of the event as a whole.

An integral part of the (syn)aesthetic experience produced in Klata's play appears to be a model of associative memory in which individual memories are involuntarily triggered as a result of contact with material traces of the past. An example of the working of this model of memory is the famous scene from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, in which the taste madeleines brings sets off a chain of memories in the protagonist connected with his past. While for Proust this associative *mémoire involontaire* serves to reveal the complicated psyche of his novel's hero, in

<sup>28</sup> Schneider, p. 163.

our site-specific performance at the Gdańsk Shipyard this mechanism allows the (syn)aesthetes to create their own narrative on the site. This is particularly evident in strategies that Klata uses to include the (syn)aesthetes in the artistic action. They are able to literally enter the space in which *H.* is played out, in this way fully experiencing the workings of the *mémoire volontaire*. An example is Hamlet's best-known soliloquy. Before the performance, willing (syn)aesthetes receive the passage from the script that contains the famous 'To be or not to be'. They are then invited to join the actors during the scene of Hamlet's first meeting with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The actors leave their roles and conduct an audition for the part of Hamlet, in which spectators read Hamlet's words from their cards.

This gesture fully rejects this monologue's traditionally strong position as the centre of a director's interpretation of Shakespeare's play. It is not just about abandoning the political interpretation of these words, as practised by directors including Krzysztof Warlikowski in his 1999 *Hamlet*.<sup>29</sup> Klata replaces all recollections of previous interpretations of this section of the play with the individual and often very personal memories of the (syn)aesthetes. What the actors do in fact is to interrupt these monologues, improvising questions about their own interpretation of the text, their first experiences in the theatre or lines they recited at drama school. The director's reference here is to the (syn)aesthetes' shared cultural memories relating to the communist era. The official memory of *Hamlet* and of the Gdańsk Shipyard, so firmly fixed in the national rhetoric, is thus supplemented by the (syn)aesthetes' individual recollections. Klata's play might therefore seem subversive, in the sense that it gives voice to participants in the transformation, whose memories of communism are often at odds with the dominant narrative and its condemnation of the former system. But one merely has to change the mode of access to *H.* to see how the (syn)aesthetic experience outlined in this way has, as Schneider would no doubt say, been captured in Adamik's archive recording, and then added to the critical-theatrical discourse on *H.* To illustrate that, let us move on to the second stage of my *expérience* and take a closer look at reviews and descriptions published after the premiere, providing an actualisation of another (syn)aesthetic experience.

Records of the reviewers' experiences of *H.* consistently locate the play at the intersection of two discourses: the artistic and the socio-political. On one hand, critics interpret the Gdańsk version as the latest work in a series of Polish productions and interpretations of *Hamlet* which since the time of Stanisław Wyspiański over a century ago have constituted a kind of diagnosis of the state of society, addressing the question 'what is there in Poland – to think about?'<sup>30</sup> One scene for which this key is used for interpretation is that of the audience with Claudius, representative of the new democratic rule. In Shakespeare, this scene is used to manifest the power of the new authority, whereas in Klata's production it is replaced by a sequence written during rehearsals in which expensive wines are tasted. Like seasoned sommeliers, the actors refer to the wines'

29 See Grzegorz Niziołek, *Extra ecclesiam* (Kraków: Homini, 2008). The author shows that the provocative absence of direct references to politics is one of the constitutive elements of this play that create a powerful tension between viewers' expectations and what happens on stage.

30 Stanisław Wyspiański, *Hamlet* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Ossolineum, 2007), p. 101.

French names and affectionately describe their sophisticated taste. As critic Piotr Gruszczyński notes, 'first from the dark emerge glasses of crimson wine. Claudius (Grzegorz Gzyl) conducts a lesson in pronouncing the names of expensive French tipples. Everything is clear. In a new state, amid the useless equipment of the striking shipyard workers, it is the spirit of *nouveau riche* fashion'.<sup>31</sup>

This quotation shows that, from his 2004 perspective, the reviewer for *Tygodnik Powszechny* reads Kłata's play as a parody of capitalist values that form the basis of the positive verdict on post-1989 changes, which led to an improvement in material conditions in the lives of a large part of society. On the other hand, Kłata's choice of the Gdańsk Shipyard as the space for his production of *Hamlet* planted him in the midst of the public debate that had been going on since 1989 on the significance and assessment of the legacy of Solidarity in the post-communist Third Polish Republic. A good example of this angle on *H.* is Łukasz Drewniak's review, which goes so far as to claim that 'Grzegorz Gzyl's Claudius is a kind of theatrical Kwaśniewski [Polish president at the time of the production]: worldly, genial, but best not look too closely at his past'.<sup>32</sup> Drewniak therefore sees in Kłata's artistic gesture a criticism of a specific politician seen as responsible for the process of transformation.

Critics frequently stress that the splice of theatre and politics in *H.* is evidence that the play belongs to the stream of Polish theatre that refers critically to Polish history. After all, the Gdańsk production was put on not long after its director's adaptation of a play by Witkacy, *Janulka, Daughter of Fizdejko*. This production in Wałbrzych made provocative and iconoclastic allusions to the Polish way of thinking about history, caricaturing paintings of Jan Matejko and participants in the Warsaw Uprising. Such interpretations of *H.* are illustrated well by comparing two reviews excerpts. Drewniak writes that 'in it the Hamlet myth is coldly destroyed and replaced by another, Polish story'.<sup>33</sup> Roman Pawłowski, meanwhile, specifies that this is a story whose protagonist is 'today's Poland, in which the rulers *would prefer to forget* about the past, and many of the young generation feel cheated and rejected'.<sup>34</sup> These reviews clearly produce a (syn)aesthetic experience whereby the participants in *H.* form an unequivocally critical view of the process of socio-political and economic change in Poland after 1989, in which the ruling powers not only forgot about events of the recent past but also misappropriated the values of Solidarity, building a state based on the exclusion of certain social groups.

From today's point of view, the (syn)aesthetic experience that emerges from the reviews of *H.* seems particularly relevant in the context of recent attempts to address the rights and wrongs of the 1990s period of transformation. Just look, for instance, at an interview with the historian of ideas Marcin Król, published in 2014 in the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*. In it, Król, one of the most influential proponents of

31 Piotr Gruszczyński, 'H., czyli piękna katastrofa', *Tygodnik Powszechny* (2004) [accessed: 30 October 2015]. Emphasis added.

32 Łukasz Drewniak, 'Człowiek z floretem', *Przekrój* 31 (2008) [accessed: 24 April 2015].

33 Drewniak.

34 Roman Pawłowski, 'Duński książę w cieniu stoczni', *Gazeta Wyborcza* 15 (2004) [accessed: 2 April 2015]. Emphasis added.

socio-economic transformation in Poland, faces up to his own naive faith in the neoliberal socio-economic system implemented at the time.

I became aware that in liberalism it is the element of individualism that begins to dominate, which then displaces other important values and kills society. This is easy to explain. Individualism has very strong support from the powers of the free market, which in an individualistic mode of life makes money. But social and civic values, solidarity and collaboration don't have that kind of impetus. They are 'inefficient' from the economic standpoint.<sup>35</sup>

In an unexpected way, Król's words return to the surface the (syn) aesthetic experience in *H.* as recorded in reviews and descriptions. This is most obvious when we examine the strategies of producing performativity that Klata utilises to expose the mechanisms of violence that operate in the new, democratic Poland. An example is the scene in which Hamlet is questioned about where he has hidden Polonius's body. As Adamik's recording shows, the scene takes place on a metal scaffolding, and (syn)aesthetes observe the action while standing on one floor of the building above the place of the action. This scene obviously recalls brutal interrogations of members of the underground opposition as well as internments that followed the introduction of martial law. Considering reviewers' earlier conclusions on the figure of Claudius as representative of ruling elites in Poland, the meaning of this scene eludes the black-and-white division of the political scene that persisted in the 1990s into good fighters of communist rule and bad supporters of it. In this context, we can interpret the decision to place the (syn)aesthetes physically above the scene taking place as an attempt to put them in a position from which they could morally judge the rulers' dubious actions. Klata is therefore equating repression on political grounds with violence used by institutions of power in a world governed by the principle of unfettered personal freedom of the individual. The director uses this strategy to frame his criticism of the post-1989 Polish socio-political system.

At the same time, Hamlet's defiance of Claudius's state, like Marcin Król's contemporary attempts to face the past, is based on a desperate search for moral rules that should be binding when a political system changes. This would help to mitigate social inequalities and not lead to economic exclusion of a large part of society. In this scene, the famous line in which Hamlet calls Claudius his mother segues smoothly into his singing the hymn *Mother, Who Understands Everything*. This was one reason that Roman Pawłowski, in his review, called this version 'the most Polish of *Hamlets*, with Christianity and the Ten Commandments as its compass'.<sup>36</sup> The record of the reviewer's experience therefore suggests that, though critical to the unequivocally positive myth of Solidarity, the production simultaneously sustains the dominant traditionally strong role of the Catholic religion in shaping national identity. From this perspective, then, we cannot interpret Klata's play purely as a critical commentary on Poland's post-1989 political reality.

How does such a changed interpretation of this site-specific performance change the (syn)aesthetic experience produced in *H.*?

<sup>35</sup> Marcin Król, Grzegorz Sroczynski, 'Byliśmy głupi', *Gazeta Wyborcza* (2014) [accessed: 20 April 2015].

<sup>36</sup> Pawłowski.



In order to answer this question, let us proceed to the third stage of my *expérience* and refer to the video recording of Klata's production, focusing this time on a section often overlooked in descriptions of it. In the first part of the film there is a short shot in which one actor, rather like a museum guide, directs (syn)aesthetes from the place where one scene takes place to the next setting. What will happen if we treat this shot as the next frame of reference for interpreting *H.*? I suspect that it might show that the (syn)aesthetic experience during this particular site-specific performance is by no means about random exploration of the shipyard space, as the way the filming style I described earlier seemed to suggest, based as it is on free movement of the camera. If we recognise the situation in which (syn)aesthetes are guided through the space of the shipyard as a frame of reference for their experience, this loses the critical potential that comes from adding their individual recollections to the dominant discourse on the Gdańsk Shipyard. This procedure, preserved on film, is not just a technical necessity enforced by safety concerns. It is extremely important to note that it is Horatio that leads the (syn)aesthetes. Inescapably, therefore, they adopt the point of view of one of the characters, which moulds their experience. Significantly, it is Horatio to whom Hamlet addresses the following telling words before he dies: 'And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story.'<sup>37</sup>

Horatio is thus compelled to pass on the tragic story of the Danish prince, ensuring that his memory will live. As a result, the (syn)aesthetes who took part in Klata's play, as well as all those watching Adamik's recording, had to become witnesses, and indirectly to take Hamlet's side. For if the events which had played out at the Gdańsk Shipyard led to a moral decline, as the interpretation described above of Claudius's court suggested, then (syn)aesthetes ought to identify with the losers who succumbed in the battle for traditional values. In fact, the division into winners and losers is no different from the post-Solidarity rhetoric of success with which the director, as the reviewers showed, seemed to be taking issue. So it is clear that the (syn)aesthetic experience produced in this play is not there to take a critical look at the process of socio-political change in Poland after 1989. What it is in fact about is passing on, both to (syn)aesthetes physically involved in the show and to viewers of Adamik's recording, a conservative vision of the past with a sharp divide into good and bad protagonists of the Polish transformation. Thus it is from this perspective that we should examine what the (syn)aesthetic experience in *H.* becomes.

The change in frame of reference described above, which I made by focusing on a brief shot in Adamik's recording, seems to have led to production of a (syn)aesthetic experience that is characteristic of contact with the form of cultural memory that Pierre Nora calls a *lieu de mémoire*.<sup>38</sup> Nora refers to a place, object or cultural practice that arises artificially at the point where 'consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn'.<sup>39</sup> Various types of such memory spaces aim to preserve the continuity of memory in the generational chain. In this context, the experience of the (syn)aesthete

37 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), p. 459.

38 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations* 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989) pp. 7–24.

39 Nora, p. 7.

in *H.* can be described using the words of Nora, who claims that 'In the last analysis, it is upon the individual and upon the individual alone that the constraint of memory weighs insistently as well as imperceptibly'.<sup>40</sup>

From this point of view, we can state that both the (syn)aesthetes participating in *H.* and those watching Adamik's recording should form the conviction that the Gdańsk Shipyard is an extremely important and often overlooked part of their national identity that demands to be commemorated. In this context, the recording of the play provides an additional confirmation of the shipyard's status as a *lieu de mémoire*. After all, the task of the *lieu de mémoire* is to continually arouse in the individual a strong experience of communing with the past, thus guaranteeing that memory is constantly refreshed. This helps to fix the Gdańsk Shipyard's position in the realm of the most important places for Polish society. Jan Klata's production – contrary to theatre critics' interpretation of it – thus imprints on (syn)aesthetes an imperative to remember the Gdańsk Shipyard. It is to become one of the foundations of the contemporary identity of Poles.

My analysis of Klata's *H.* as an *expérience* allowed me to show two important features of a (syn)aesthetic experience. First, the experience is not transient and ephemeral, and does not vanish at the end of the performative event. On the contrary, it is actualised with each individual contact with various kinds of records of this experience as well as with material and non-material traces of this historic site-specific performance. Second, using Schneider's terminology introduced above, we can say that depending on the mode of access to the past, the (syn)aesthetic experience itself changes. In *H.*, we were initially dealing with an experience of unfettered exploration of the space of the Gdańsk Shipyard and the related mechanism of associative memory that emerged from the way of filming used by Katarzyna Adamik to record the performance. Next, from the records of the experience of reviewers and descriptions of the performance, an experience emerged that Klata used to summon in (syn)aesthetes a critical verdict on the Polish transformation after 1989. Finally, though, pointing to the brief shot from Adamik's film in which (syn)aesthetes were led from scene to scene by Horatio, I produced another (syn)aesthetic experience. It turned out that this can have a critical potential and confirm the official discourse on the past, at the same time saddling (syn)aesthetes with a kind of compulsion to remember the lost greatness of the Gdańsk Shipyard as a symbol of the democratic transformation in Poland.

Presented in this way, the three consecutive stages of the *expérience* I conducted make it clear that a (syn)aesthetic experience, seemingly entrapped in an archive, in fact preserves its affective potential and eludes unequivocal interpretations by constantly transforming with the succession of procedures applied in the performance scholar's laboratory.

*Translated by Ben Koschalka*

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<sup>40</sup> Nora, p. 16.

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## ABSTRACT

Mateusz Chaberski

**The (Syn)aesthetic Experience of Participants in Site-specific Performances in the Performance Scholar's Laboratory**

The aim of this paper is to formulate a new method of analysing the assemblage-based and affective experience of the recipient-participant of site-specific performance. Drawing on Josephine Machon's concept of (syn)aesthetics, the author coins the term *(syn)aesthete* referring to the recipient-participant in order to indicate that his or her experience emerges as a dynamic fusion of sensual perception, intellectual experience as well as individual and collective memories. From this point of view, the article critically examines the traditional ontology of performance as being always "at the vanishing" point (Herbert Blau). Especially in the context of contemporary theatrical reenactment practices, performance can no longer be perceived as ephemeral and transient.

As Rebecca Schneider succinctly points out, performance continues to exist in a series of affective transformations depending on the researcher/(syn) aesthete's 'mode of access' to the archive. The author elucidates this process analysing the performance of *H!* (2004) staged by Jan Klata in the dilapidated space of Gdansk Shipyard and its documentation. Using Bruno Latour's concept of experiment, the author scrutinises trials and changes occurring in his own performance scholar's laboratory whereby the (syn)aesthetic experience is produced undergoing dramatic transformations. This allows the author to describe a trajectory of (syn) aesthetic experience ranging from the experience of unfettered exploration of the Shipyard's space, through the experience of criticism towards the Polish post-1989 transformation to the experience of a compulsion to remember the lost greatness of the Gdańsk Shipyard as a symbol of the democratic transformation in Poland.