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CROSSING THE BORDERS OF PERFORMATIVE MOMENTS: IN CONVERSATION WITH ANDRÉ LEPECKI

*In this interview taken in May 2012 at New York University, André Lepecki offers a unique perspective on the development of Performance Studies at NYU. Being in fact the only current member of the department who has been first a Master and a PhD student, and later a professor in the same department, Lepecki has a first-hand and multifaceted view of the hallmarks of the New York tradition of Performance Studies, and of the changes that have characterized them during the past twenty years. Arrived at New York University in the early nineties, with a background primarily in anthropology and dance, here Lepecki familiarized with philosophy, performing art and “critical theory”. Analyzing the history of Performance Studies at NYU, Lepecki identifies three key stages or moments: the “epic” moment, the moment of the “signature”, and the moment of the “corporations”. Furthermore he recognizes in the present **leanings** a greater focus on “critical theory”, but also on “American Studies”, which, with the exception of the work done by Diana Taylor with her Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, leaves little room for the global opening that characterized NYU during the past decades. In his view, today the department favors two main strands of studies: “everyday life performances” and “performing art”. Finally, reflecting on the ontology of performance, Lepecki sees in its “disappearing” the rich potential for its various forms of “reappearing”.*

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CC: I was wondering if we could talk a little bit about you, your academic and professional interests and the kind of work and research you are interested in.

AL: I am a Professor in Performance Studies. I came to New York in 1993 to do my doctoral studies here at NYU. I was coming from Portugal where I grew up, and in Portugal I had undergraduate degree in Cultural Anthropology, and after that for three years I was what they call Junior Researcher in something called Center for Sociological Studies, at the University of Lisbon, where I was doing research related to the history of smells in medical literature in the XVIII century in Portugal. So I was working at the time more in competitive psychology actually, in ethology, animal behavior... that kind of stuff. But in the late 80s my friends were all dancers and musicians, by chance, and because of my work in Anthropology and non-verbal communication we had conversations, and then I started helping them in productions. In Portugal that was a very big moment because my generation is the first that achieves a kind of young adulthood in democracy, after the revolution 1975, and there is a big dance boom. So I was working with these people, I was writing for newspapers for a science supplement, and I had a weekly column on science. So I was writing and it was through this kind of articulation between anthropology, social sciences and dance that I kind of discover a field called Performance Studies. I was working closely as a *dramaturg* and I was working also as a dance critic, but I would have never thought that would be a field that would host all these kinds of things. So by chance in a conference in 1991 I think, in the North of Portugal there was a conference on the body or something like that, and I met Dwight Conquergood who was chair in Performance Studies at the Northwestern at that time, and Santiago Novac, they

both passed away. Santiago is a very important dance scholar; I was presenting this paper on Pina Bauch and Ethnography, actually Ethnography and Surrealism, and they both came to me and said: “There is something called Performance Studies”. So I first got invited to go to Northwestern. I got accepted there but I did not get all the grants, but I also felt it was a little bit too ethnographic at that time for what I was interested in. And then I learnt about the department here, and I came here to do Performance Studies. When I came here my project was to think about post-colonial – let’s say – forgotten in post-colonial in Portugal. It was about like how a kind of history of colonialism had been raised immediately after the revolution, and a kind of new identity for Portugal was built upon the notion of being a European country. So I arrived with kind of desire to write the dissertation. I came to work with an anthropologist that was here at that time at Performance Studies, Michael Taussing. Michael had left for Columbia the semester I arrived, but then I met Peggy Phelan, who was here. And the year after I arrived, José Muñoz was hired as an assistant professor. Encountering Peggy and José made a huge shift for me in thinking about my work and the kind of scholarship I was thinking about, because I had educated myself in anthropology and dance, so in a way there this paradigm of Performance Studies being something between theatre and anthropology, to quote the title of Richard Schechner book. But then with Peggy, the year I arrived *Unmarked* came out, and the next year José arrived from Duke. And with both of them Performance Studies somehow (in many different ways... they don’t have the same scholarship) became something between philosophy and critical theory and performance art, as supposed between theatre and anthropology. So a different kind of paradigm, and that’s when it became very very interesting, because I did not have any training in critical theory of philosophy, except from the peripheral things that one needs to read to do cultural anthropology. Also performance art was quite new. I had been working with dance theatre, with Mark Stuart and other choreographers in Europe, with Veramentero in Portugal and other people, but not performance art; it was something I did not know. So I think at that moment my work re-calibrated itself, shifted, and the question that Peggy Phelan and also other scholars in Performance Studies ask, which is the political ontology of performance, became very very important for me. So that also inflected more my doctoral work, my dissertation which was about, again, postcolonial mismanagement of memory in Portugal, but now in relation to choreography and in particular in dialogue with certain critical theory. And then, after much back and forth, I worked as a curator, independent writer, I was doing projects mostly in Europe. And then the opportunity, there was a job opened in Performance Studies for a dance scholar, to which I applied and I became a professor here, and been teaching here for ten years. And I feel like during that period my interest in thinking about dance from a performance studies perspective was to emphasize two things. One was to emphasize the articulation between philosophy and contemporary dance, and the other one was to think about “what does it mean to create methodologies, epistemologies and modes of approaching contemporary dance that dance studies produced at this very moment through choreographers, and how to implement a kind of critical, theoretical apparatus to address that, because this has to do with dance studies stuff, dance studies the way I met it here”. I was a student of Mark Franco, who was a professor of dance history and dance theory at Santa Cruz. He was super important; he had a big influence on me. He was teaching here as a guest, a visiting professor in Performance Studies, and I was also having dance classes with Marcia Siegel, who was one of the founders of the so-called “*New York Dance Criticism School*”. So there are very different approaches and with Mark it is very clear that it is about critical theory, it is about the kind of Marxian cloud of thinking about a dance, but inflected with the

historical work that he does, mostly Baroque dance, but then around the formation of what we call Modern Dance, the 20s, 30s, 40s. So I had this historical model and then there was dance anthropology, and then the contemporary was done through criticism or dance reviews. I found that very very bizarre; there was a big vacuum at least in the 90s of how to create what Randy Martin called “critical dance theory”. That’s the project that I have been developing here in Performance Studies, particularly with a specific philosophical constellation that I like, which is a kind of Deleuze cloud, which means Agamben, Foucault, a little bit of Walter Benjamin once in a while, and a big big conversation with certain post-colonial theory... these are the fields that speak mostly to the kind of also political proposition in dance that I like to write about. That is my work and there few books that came out of that, which is “*Of the Presence of the Body*”, which is an anthology that came out in 2004, and there the idea was really to think about this kind of critic of presence in dance studies, coming from Derrida and that kind of stuff. And then the anthology was “*Planes of Composition*”, that came out of a series that I did for TDR called “*Dance Composes Philosophy Composes Dance*”, which is the solution of this big amalgamation of dance and philosophy, which is actually quite natural for choreographers, but for some reasons academics or the public at large find it bizarre. But it has been always a very fruitful combination or dialogue. And then “*Exhausting Dance*”, where we have both the desire to find this articulation between performance art and choreography, and to think about also this articulation between choreography and visual art and philosophy and political issues as well. I think that after “*Exhausting Dance*” I spent three years working intensely in four curatorial projects. One was a smallish festival called “*Nomadic New York*” for Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, the other one was a big project of an authorized re-doing of Allan Kaprow’s “*18 Happenings in Six Parts*”, in 2006. And then in 2008-2009 to be the chief curator/director of this performing arts festival *Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin*, called IN TRANSIT. And those are mega-projects, so for a while I was totally involved in this kind of curatorial projects. For me it is always very informative to have not only a spectatorial relationship to art, but also to make it. And I was lucky to have these invitations. And then another project of building a dance archive for an exhibition in a gallery... And so, after that, after these curatorial big four years, what happened was that was going on in terms of writing in “*Exhausting Dance*” now became two separated projects; so I am working on a book right now which is a kind of archeology of the relationship between sculpture and dance since the 50s, and it’s really about the relationship between visual arts and dance, not so much dance and visual arts. Why is that visual artists all of the sudden find in dance like a mode of articulation for visuality. So that’s one thing, and it’s already somewhere in “*Exhausting Dance*”, but not completely. And the other think is this kind of the politics of performance, or the choreopolitics of dance, if you want, which is becoming another book called “*Grounds of Performance*”.

CC: Thanks! You have been touching many topics that anticipate some of the questions I have for you, so I will be trying to navigate your answer to highlight certain elements... You have been here both as a student and now as professor, so you have been witnessing different phases of the department. I was just wondering if you could tell me a little bit about the developments that you have been living here. So how this department has changed since you got here until now, so which is the current identity of the department now in relation to the way it used to be.

AL: It is huge! Because I have been here for almost twenty years. I arrived in August in August 1993. It's crazy, right? First of all, institutionally and architecturally it did not look this way. It was more shabby, falling apart. It's almost a different planet. The economy was different. There were many more PhD students entering every year, but also there was not funding for the PhD students... a very very different place. There is this artist whose work I like. He is one of the co-founders of the Critical Art Ensemble; his name is Ricardo Dominguez, and he has this sentence. I just like the sentence. It said: "Every movement has three moments: the epic moment, the moment of signature and the moment of the corps... whatever movement... artistic movement, philosophical movement, etc. So, the epic one is the one in which people get together and they just make something, and that was like the beginning, the 80s in Performance Studies, the creation of the department, the formation of the department, getting people together, building something. And then I feel like I arrived here towards the very end of that epic moment, and falling to the moment of signature; and the moment of signature is the moment of economy; it's the moment in which something called Performance Studies, which existed here and at North Western, started to circulate globally and erupted everywhere... everywhere, like departments of Performance Studies all over the world, literally. And that's the 90s: that's from '95 to 2005... that's the moment when the image of signature becomes so consolidated. So this is what I lived here. What I remember being different is that there was an idea... I guess... but this is also for political reasons, the United States have changed, like much more foreign students, we had Africanists in the faculty [...] there was a lot of students coming from all sort of places... Sub-Saharan Africa, coming to do their PhD work here, their Master work here. The Master was longer: it was two years. There was an emphasis on post-colonial theory. So it was a quite different landscape. And then through the moment of signature I think there is a kind of distillation of Performance Studies. There is also like the desire to form a project of defining the discipline more and more. And maybe now this kind of moment in which NYU as a corporation becomes a kind of new-liberal global enterprise, maybe entering the phase of the corps, which on the other hand is the most powerful one, because it escapes economy again. So the hope is that at this point there is a possibility of creating a different kind of articulation of Performance Studies in which it does not matter anymore to affirm it as a discipline. There is a moment when it is important, so that University boards and departments and colleagues all over the world recognize that there is such a field, and it is ok to have departments with that name and, hire faculty for these positions, develop this kind of research... it is super important. Now we have to forget again (this is my thing). Just do what we need to do. But I am going away from your question... the differences? I think one of the biggest differences... I feel there is more emphasis on critical theory, and I think that just because of geopolitical issues, after 9/1, in a way and perhaps unfortunately, with the exception of the Hemispheric Institute, American Studies is dominating... it used to be much less like that; it was more global.

CC: Thank you! You were saying that now Performance Studies does not need to be explained anymore. It is not like twenty years ago. But there are still some places where Performance Studies does not exist as an academic field. How would you describe Performance Studies there?

AL: Well... I am not so sure if it is a field. So, in order to define it, you have to go away from ontology, and instead of saying "what it is" you have to say "what it does"... and that's already a Performance Studies approach, right? So this emphasis on performativity. So what is it that

Performance Studies I think does to the academia at large? I think there are two major modes of approaching Performance Studies. One through thinking about performance of everyday life, meaning looking at behavior of social groups, communities, political formations as performance, and try to identify methods that could address politics or institutional formations, away from the usual discourses that we tend to attach to them. So this would be one way of thinking about it, and that's not necessarily what I do. I leave this to my colleagues. What I do is to look at art, and particularly contemporary art, and try to see how can we formulate discourses and critical tools to address artistic practices away from discourses that already assign to them a specific image and identity. So, let's say, if you are thinking about dance, for instance, if you think about dance in terms of its identity, you would say "dance it's about movement, there for whatever is relevant, you look at dance to be some kind of descriptive, photo-logical instrument, so that through my 'movement analysis' I can then say or explain this art object". I think that Performance Studies breaks down this kind of methodologies that are already embedded with specific apparatus of perception in critical analysis and to say that dance does much more, for instance to move. So perhaps there are ways in which they are there for I can develop different critical mechanisms to enrich the reading of that particular discipline. So, for instance, dance doesn't move, it stays still, dance produces books, dance produces films, dance produces photography, dance produces discourse. So I feel that what Performance Studies does is to allow possibility to break down this kind of rigid, preconceived disciplinary boxes, that on one way fixate the art-work and fixate the scholar who is gonna analyze that art-work. So for me it's not a field, but it's a system of circulating ideas that have to be always always always into with the processes of formation that it tries to address or read or to write about. I refuse to say that Performance Studies is the field that studies performance in everyday life, and looks at models... and bla bla bla... and that's what I meant by the phases of the corps. I think right now we can escape the kind of the disciplines of the signature... you know... this is what we do... this is who we are... we are not theatre studies, we are different from theatre studies because we look at the performative aspects of drama, for instance, as supposed just to literature; but that seems to be not productive. I am not sure if this answers your question...

CC: Yes, it does! Thank you! One of my attempts is trying to understand what a Performance Studies perspective can reveal which is new in terms of analyzing a specific object. And so, if we think about the object of Performance Studies, which is performance, and this is a tautological thing, then you might ask 'what is the difference when you use a Performance Studies perspective or a dance studies perspective if my object is dance'. You have just answered this question, but I was wondering if you could expand a little bit on it.

AL: ... but even thinking about perspectives... perspective is interesting because it is possible to build a prospectively correct representation with several vanishing points... that's the thing and I feel like Performance Studies is able to or should aiming at creating representation, by saying that we can have multiple vanishing points in an image. It's always about parallaxes. I am moving; the thing is moving, so how to account for these endless mobilities of discourses and objects that we analyze. So the perspective in a way I think is a savage perspective. I think it's not by chance that it comes to be in the United States, because there is a slight necessity for a little bit of critical misbehavior, or a little bit of cracking hope in the well-behaved modalities of academic appliances

of what is a definition of a field; the moment you define a field the field is gone, you have generalized space. So the question is more topographical.

CC: The last question is about the “ontology of performance’ and what Peggy Phelan writes about it, which I find quite illuminating, as I think you do too. I was wondering how do you face the main features of performance, for instance its nature of disappearing, every time you deal with this object both as a curator and as a scholar...

AL: That’s a huge question! But in short I would say that it’s not only performance that disappears, it’s not only dance that disappears. The question of disappearance is everywhere. Bill Viola in one of his books talks about videos and ephemeral art in the same terms. So for me, maybe because informed by a genealogy of dance history, one of the moments in which choreography comes into being is expressed in dance manuals from the late Sixteen century French dance manual, in which there is this kind of dialogue, in which one of the interlocutors of the dialogue talks to the dancing master and he says: “Dance disappears, it goes away, please write it down then on a book, so that in a future I can dance again, and I can learn these dances”. So in dance studies at least there is a kind of melancholia associated to this disappearance. And the question is “how to transform the effect of melancholia into a different kind of affect that is not one that freezes the object into this kind of desire to be turned into something that has already past. So I think more about potentials and virtualities. I think disappearance is just a wonderful way for reappearance, it’s a conditional possibility for reappearing, and reappearing is always an invention, an event. It’s always an activation of nativity... the possibility of the course of an event is actually disappearance. So it is about changing the affect around this notion of disappearing and remembering that it persists... performance persists through memory, through corporeality, through remembering... and then the question of writing... my opinion is that every time you write you are off-time; so you are always writing about the past, the future, the present... writing is a different kind of thing.