

## Future Perfect

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*For he knoweth not that which shall be: for who can tell him when it shall be?*

(Ecclesiastes: 8.7)

*This is eternity. This now. This foreshortened span.*

(Olson: 1950)

*The future will only contain what we put into it now.*

(Situationist graffito: 1968)

Ideas, or at least our attempts to come into some sort of negotiation with ideas, often start running in occasional or mundane ways: an invitation in 2008 from Tanz Quartier Wien to consider the future of performance; a chance (and on reflection perhaps regrettable) remark in October 2009 to a passenger in a train about to leave Ljubljana station that I usually prefer to 'travel backwards into the future'. As regards the former I have tried to argue elsewhere that the future is in part produced by shifts of attention in the present. **(1)** This idea considered, tacitly in relation to Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History', how an attempt could be made (within the making of performance) 'to deliver tradition anew from the conformism which is on the point of overwhelming it.' (Benjamin, 1940: VI) Regarding the latter, and more explicitly in relation to Benjamin's view of overwhelming conformism, I would like to examine the idea of 'looking backwards into the future', and what that might entail, by recalling three particular performances in order to think about this complex relationship between the past, memory, reconstruction, the present moment and the yet-to-come. My approach is to recall these performances with reference to a constellation of texts that inform the ideas that follow here; a sort of 'cento' or patchwork approach that in itself seems to suggest the disclosures that looking backwards into the future might evoke. **(2)**

In her introduction to this volume Isabel de Naveran, considering Marten Spangberg's 'irreverent' [A Swedish Dance History](#) (2009) asks how we might write the histories of dance and performance if our experiences are no longer unidirectional. The increasing sense of the multi-directionality and openness of time and experience, partly brought about by the accessibility of digital technologies and the relative ubiquity of data, has an impact not only on a normative perception of history, or science, or social relations as 'progress', but also on our understanding of the politics of community,



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**(3)** its implications for ideas of authorship and conventional attitudes to art and art making, and therefore over a view of the future that is more complex than a simple actualization of the past. Talking of the difference between ‘re-enactment’ as a copying of forms, and ‘reconstruction’ as a ‘radically critical practice’ that engages both historical and present contexts of the work, de Naveran goes on to observe that ‘often, the most interesting practices, those that transmit the conflicts and strategies developed by artists, those that show our bodies as social and cultural signs, [are] not taken into account by the official dance history’.

The work that I want to consider here consists of two performance-actions that I saw in 2000 in Seedamm Cultural Centre in Switzerland, and at the Centre for Contemporary Culture (CCCB) in Barcelona, by the Cologne-based German performance artist Boris Nieslony; and a recent (2009) performance-installation in Berlin by the choreographer and dancer Ayara Hernández. None of these works would fall easily into the category of ‘official’ histories of performance or dance. **(4)** They do however in my view provide examples of how looking backwards shifts attention and, in so doing, constructs a future that is not simply ‘related to the past as an actualisation of its becoming’ but rather opens to experience ‘the plurality of ways that life comes into being and is exposed to possible actions.’ (Kunst, 2008: 1) Perhaps to recall such marginal works is already to resist that ‘mistaken notion that a painting is simply a depiction and money a representation of some prior visual or economic reality’ as Brian Rotman put it in his semiotic analysis of the concept of zero (1993:2); a notion which could be said to form a still prevalent view of the function of art work. The argument for ‘looking backwards into the future’ as a process of recollection, **(5)** is precisely to decouple the descriptive function of the work and (re)assert that art enacts a complex vector of the past in the present moment, rather than describing a prior reality. The instability and constant shifting between body, object and value that enables us to negotiate the world is what art opens for us from the past, as a disclosure of what might be.

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The first work is concerned with the question of objects - the everyday ‘things’ that mediate between our bodies, and the apparatuses that determine our subjectivities. **(6)** I saw Boris Nieslony’s performance-action in Switzerland in January 2000 with an audience of about fifty people gathered to mark the opening of the ‘Schwarze Lade’ - the Black Kit Archive - at the Seedamm Cultural Centre, Pffafikon **(7)**. The beginning consisted of Nieslony opening a box (let us say it was a box of some capacity) which contained an assortment of small objects - more or less ephemeral objects, mundane objects - that, one by one, Nieslony distributed as gifts to each of the assembled audience. Nieslony in his shabby dark suit, in need of a shave, with his singular ability to disturb, to hold you on the edge of things, the beginnings of a ‘terror we are just able to bear’ in Rilke’s words (1912). Each gift was considered in relation to its recipient - a pen, a feather, a sweet, a mirror, a pencil, some



make-up, shells, a plastic toy, and at last another box, covered in a loose red silk cloth, a box of photographs. The objects that formed the centre of the action stand in for a set of social relations that begin to bind us together as a group and in a particular relation to Nieslony himself. The 'meaning' of each of the gifts is at a certain level obscure - 'why does he choose this object for such-and-such a person? - though most people gathered for the event knew of Nieslony or at least his work. The notion of 'gathering' becomes of importance here, not simply as a gathering of people, but in two related senses: the 'gathering' of associations and values that coalesce and accrete around the object as 'thing' **(8)**; and the 'futura' of such gatherings, the way in which things in performance can be made to disclose the potential of time, space and experience, which might also be described as one of the functions of art work. It is instructive to note that the process of building 'community', in its sense of a form of gathering engaged with here, combines 'being-with' (*com-*) and 'gift' (*munus*). **(9)**

The forms of gathering then that take place in Nieslony's action - the processes of gathering time, space, association - intensify the objects as 'gifts' and, as such, extend obligations, which like much else in Nieslony's work always hover at a relational edge, are always likely to transform or decompose what seems familiar into the unfamiliar, the domesticated into the feral or monstrous.

The first object in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) - a collection of short, written 'portraits' of domestic objects, food, and rooms - begins with 'A carafe, that is a blind glass' and confronts the uneasy space between words and things, where either 'words *are* things, partaking of their solidity and presence, or [...] material things are hollowed out by an awareness that they can never be seen as anything but signifiers in a psychic space.' (Schwenger, 2006: 23) The portrait, consisting of three sentences, ends with the sentence 'The difference is spreading'. The classification of things that might, in a descriptive mode, involve likeness, consistency and narrative coherence, in Nieslony's classification of things, as in Stein's, offers only difference.

What kinds of 'things' are in use in this performance? How do they construct a world, a future? The everyday, familiar objects that we are offered as gifts, and which we might understand as 'acceptable' or normative gifts (pens, mirrors, make-up and so forth) are, in the 'tradition' of performance art, considered, but not rehearsed. They are 'occasional' in the sense that they cohere and make sense in the context of a singular, once only, event, unlike theatre which might consider objects in a different mode as 'repeatable' and therefore able to provoke a predictable affect. **(10)** They build a set of familiar and ephemeral relationships in time, at least until the last 'gift' is offered. This is the red silk covered box of life-size black and white forensic portraits of victims of atrocity and disease that has formed an important part of Nieslony's work, appearing in many of his actions **(11)**. The gift' is offered, but who would take the responsibility or the obligation inherent in such a gift? What does such a gift mean? The ungraspable nature of things, beyond their appearance, is in



effect doubled here in the anonymous faces that appear on the surface of the photographs, seemingly neatly ordered in their archive, but crowding outwards towards us in each act of remembrance, recollection or invocation. **(12)**

The sense of disturbance that underlies Nieslony's work, the necessity to summon and acknowledge our obligations to the past in order to inhabit a present and imagine a future, has many parallels in mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century literary and performance work. Writing in the mid-1980s on Walter Abish's experimental prose, Malcolm Bradbury noted that '[t]he world of atrocity and violence hidden behind signs is a recurrent concern [...] and has much to do with his essential tone. It is apparently neutral and analytical [...] but the neutrality is there to make us anxious, to make us look into utterance itself.' He goes on to observe that under the flatness of Abish's writerly proceduralism 'dark meanings still hide, troubling the surface'. The 'old atrocities' **(13)** that concern Abish and Nieslony are also apparent in the work of Raimund Hoghe where, as indicated by Una Bauer, both language and the body are haunted by a relationship with objects that contain degrees of both atrocity and revelation:

'The objects that Hoghe uses are mundane objects [...] but what is interesting is that he doesn't treat them as mundane objects - in his hands and in his performances they become objects of sacred powers: to bring back the dead, to revive memories, to heal the wounded, to unite what is separated, to provide connections between his different pieces, to organize space, to provide acceptance for that which is difficult to accept'. (Bauer, 2010)

This is the function of the object: to defamiliarise, to resist the 'overwhelming conformity' of interpretation, to mediate and disclose its potential to a future that might, in Ranciere's terms, both attend to social cohesion and bear witness to catastrophe. (Ranciere, 2009:120). The gatherings of association and investment that at any moment constitute a 'thing' are always at best a partial appearance - a disclosure of potential futures.

By way of parenthesis, and to take an extreme case of an object directed towards the future that operates almost only at the level of language, beyond its solidity and visual presence and beyond utterance: Stephen Kaltenbach's time-capsule 'Never' effectively produces a future through the materiality of language. Engraved on a cylinder of oxidized steel the single word 'Never' (as instruction, as promise, as brand perhaps?) might well outlast its interpretative lifetime. Kaltenbach has worked on time capsules since 1967, though the date of each capsule is unspecified. 'The content of the capsules is unknown, and his instructions are engraved on the works. The most eye-catching characteristic is that an important element of the work is hidden, and the work itself must be destroyed to reveal that hidden secret' **(14)** The object is paradoxical in the same sense that potentiality is paradoxical as Bojana Kunst points out: 'One can [...] become aware of his or her



potential to exist, create and spring forth from one-self, *only when this potential is not realized*. Potentiality is then a temporal constellation, which is divided from the action itself, it is not translated in to the action at all.' (Kunst, 2008: 1). The object is paradoxical, but also necessary for the constitution of the subject, for each of us, however far 'the thing holds itself aloof from us and remains self-sufficient [...] a resolutely silent Other' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 322)

If the object, the 'thing', as we see here with Nieslony's everyday objects, is always in part hidden, ungraspable and beyond its appearance, it also partakes of an ambiguous status, both 'domesticated' and 'monstrous', in which art work discloses itself in between this dynamic, and thereby asserts itself as enacting, as potential, and as plurality.

What I recall most clearly was the ending of Nieslony's action, in a large studio space opening on to a gallery on one side - light coming from above; and, along the rear side, seen from the position of an on-looking audience, a white wall with a door towards the right hand site, slightly opening onto a dark space beyond. I thought of Beckett's 'Ghost Trio' and of the door that stands 'imperceptibly ajar' (15). This sensation of ambiguity, of the domesticated unravelling again to reveal the monstrous, as the figure of Nieslony walked slowly away from us towards the door, his action almost ending, suspending himself between body, object and value. He does not leave; the door remains slight open, letting in through its space of appearance the uncertainty and possibility of a future that is both behind us and in front of us. The door, in this sense of its appearance, discloses the Lacanian sense of 'Thing' that Schwenger explains as follows:

It must be stressed that although the object is perceived as alien, the Thing is not that object but that perception; the Thing is a psychic state, and is in us, not in the world - though it is the discovery of the world, the world as other than us, that gives rise to that state'. (2006: 10)

Performance, by defamiliarising, by putting the everyday world into question, opens a perceptual world that often radiates around loss and emptiness at the same time that it reconstructs and reconfigures possibility. Lacan has asserted that 'all art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness' (quoted in Schwenger, 2006: 33). In 1910 Rilke's autobiographical character Malte Laurids Brigge asks 'Is it possible that all these people have an exact knowledge of a past that never happened? Is it possible that all realities are nothing to them; that their life is winding down, connected to nothing at all, like a clock in an empty room? Yes, it is possible? (2009: 16)

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Walter Benjamin proposes a materialistic approach to the past in Fragment VI of 'On the Concept of History': 'To articulate what is past does not mean to recognise "how it really was". It means to take control of memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger.' (Benjamin 1940: VI). A materialist articulation of history is not then primarily a descriptive function, but an enactive function. Writing on this notion of the 'moment of danger' in relation to our present time, Bojana Kunst observes that 'with the rise of immaterial work, human language, imagination and creativity have become primary capitalistic sources of value' and argues that the moment of our present danger 'reveals itself exactly through the violence of constant actualisation', the constant actualisation of experience that formed a central aesthetic and political notion of 20<sup>th</sup> century contemporary performance, an 'experience without remains' which effectively deprives the future of its 'imaginative potentiality'. In contrast Kunst imagines a future of performance that would 'enable a state of bodily intensities, but would also give us [-in Nielslony's actions or Kaltenbach's capsules-] the license to daydream'. (Kunst: 2008: 6)

If the first example looked backwards to the shifts of attention and the disclosure of futures brought about through familiar and domesticated objects, the second example shifts the question to the value of the 'now', the present moment as focussed by performance in which spectators are constrained to actively participate, and thus to make decisions on how to behave, on what ethical move to make, moves that are precipitated by the transformation of the domesticated into the monstrous. To clarify this movement, Derrida's analysis of the relationship between the monstrous and the future is familiar, but worth repeating here. The 'openness' of experience - here located as artwork which remains open to the contingent, the unpredictable, the monstrous - is what enables the movement of culture to take place:

A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would already be predictable, calculable and programmable tomorrow. All experience open to the future is prepared or prepares itself to welcome the monstrous *arrivant*, to welcome it, that is to accord hospitality to that which is absolutely foreign or strange, but also, one must add, to try to domesticate it, that is, to make it part of the household [economy] and have it assume the habits, to make us assume new habits. This is the movement of culture.' (Derrida 1992: 387)

This movement is what leads us to that which is beyond itself, and to effect its subsequent domestication; what, in Benjamin's terms, enables us to resist the potentially overwhelming forces of conformism, and which in this example is provoked or invoked through participation.



The circumstances of the performance-action in December 2000 were particular to the public space and time in which the action took place. **(16)** For some the public space is activated by the performance; for others walking past, who have no idea or are not interested in what is happening, the performance is either invisible or peripheral. The back of the Centre for Contemporary Culture in Barcelona opens out onto a public pedestrian space and 'vehicular access' to the rear of the building. In the walkway, under a closable grating, a narrow set of steps leads down to a steel door that provides access one of the theatre spaces, a 'green-room' behind the stage. At the top of the steps is a metal grid/ grating which provides a roof-light to a small space connecting the green room to the steps. Spectators gathering around the grating looked down into a vault-like space and saw a table with a red cloth, an open box of photos (the same set as in the performance-action at Seedamm) and a square metal plate/ sheet the size of the box of photos. The plate rested at one end of the table. It held a pile of coins and was attached at its four corners to a single blue rope that ran upwards through the grating and back down again into the space.

From the rear corner of the vault Nieslony walked to the table and looped the hanging end of the blue rope around his neck. He then began to walk back towards the far corner of the space. As he moved the metal plate with coins lifted away from the table rising towards the spectators above, the rope gradually tightening around his neck. He sank down to his knees, the rope biting deeply into his neck, gradually cutting off his windpipe. At this point the temporality of the performance began to change. Spectators, especially those directly over the grating, rapidly began to realize that unless they could find a means to off-set the weight of the metal plate piled with coins, Nieslony would be in danger of strangulation. They also began to realize that there was no available access to the space, its doors opening only from within. The rope, now under tension from both ends, was difficult to prise away from the grating, so as to allow some relief. The situation that emerged, or more accurately, was provoked, in turn provoked action and negotiation in the present, a participation in the immediacy of the live event that cannot be separated from the ethical questions that the larger action (initiated by Nieslony) prompts. This immediacy, that is always somehow deferred in theatre (whatever our individual response in terms of how to react or participate: looking on, walking away, calling for help, stopping the pull of the rope on Nieslony's neck) in many senses confronts us with a future, in the form of the 'future perfect' - what will have happened before another action in the future takes place; the past in the future. The ethical dimension of Nieslony's action, questions of exploitation, passivity, responsibility, vulnerability, sits within the now familiar traditions of performance art practice; for example Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* (1974) and *Rhythm 5* (1974); or the work of Chris Burden or André Stitt, that both interrogate and perform 'the experience without remains' that Bojana Kunst critiques in her proposals for a future of performance.

The resonance of the imagery - the vault as repository, the strong-room, the scales of value, the inaccessibility of the performer in a space locked from the inside on both entrances, and the inability



of the audience to intervene in an action which rapidly begins to exceed the normative boundaries of performance as passive representation, has a number of effects: one of which is to shift attention to a very present moment in which we are both required to act and are unable to act. In this moment we see ourselves both determined by the past - the condition of things/ events which have been constructed so as to lead to a seeming - but perhaps unseemly - *impasse* in which we feel exploited and helpless, a situation which mirrors the relationship of value between the two types of object that Nieslony interposes his body between: a relationship between photographs and money, a relationship of uneasy exchange in which, on the one hand, photographs stand in for absent Others; and on the other, money, which 'signifying nothing' beyond itself as a meta-sign, stands in for itself.

**(17)**

What also gathers around this action is the materiality and inherent play of language - that makes us, in Malcolm Bradbury's words, 'look into utterance itself'. Not that a word was uttered during the action, at least by the performer; Boris Nieslony was literally unable to speak for some time afterwards. It is however interesting to note that the etymology of 'utter' (from Middle Dutch *ūteren*) includes 'speak, make known, give currency to (coins).' The etymology of the word 'shall' deriving from Old English and Germanic tongues includes not only the notions of obligation - 'I owe', 'I ought' (to express duty or necessity); 'guilt' and 'debt' (German: *schuld*) but also shifted in Middle English to include notions of 'futuraity', what shall be, the yet-to-come, with its attendant responsibilities (and anxieties). Robert Pogue Harrison discusses Heidegger's concepts of guilt and conscience in these terms: '[g]uilt now refers to the debt I owe to my future. As long as my life has not reached an end I remain existentially insolvent', burdened with a debt, guilty with respect to my 'outstanding end'".

Perhaps this debt that we carry with us in the present moment of our lives is a part of the 'gap' that the British 'walking' artist Simon Whitehead, who also witnessed this performance-action, wrote of on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2000:

'Boris Nieslony's work remains with me on a physical and oneiric level; the feeling of being transported somewhere that I haven't been before ... perhaps, a collective experience? A meditation on the gap he talked of, also for me, creating a space where we sensed danger on an animal level, and were confronted by the choice or need to act. I remain grateful for this. In a quiet way, I felt it brought those who witnessed it, together.

The contrastive dynamic here, of closure and dis-closure, the creation of a space, a gap that gathers people together, the continual opening of experience that forms a temporary zone, a possible community - also operates within the materiality of language as Peter Schwenger indicates in his discussion of the relationship between words and things. Following Heidegger's argument that '[l]anguage, by naming beings [...] first brings beings to word and appearance' he points out that:



[t]his is not simply to say that things are re-created in language [...] but that things become objects - objects of a subject, of a subjectivity that language both expresses and, as Lacan has taught us, shapes.' When things are named they are changed and assimilated into the terms of the human subject.

All of our knowledge of the object is only knowledge of its modes of representation - or rather of *our* modes of representation, the ways in which we set forth the object to the understanding, of which language is one.' (Schwenger, 2006: 23)

The materiality of language suggests that it enters into the gap that things leave. Schwenger notes that Gertrude Stein's language 'invites us into a process of making sense', not into the further description or definition of things, but into a materiality of language that shows the play of the mind rather than the thing. For Schwenger 'the integrity of things must always fragment, along with the words that attempt to fill their hollows', and later, in reference to the processual work of Francis Ponge, he states that 'the work does not come to rest, then, in a thing made of words' but neither conversely does it come to rest as 'experience without remains'. The value of the 'now' is precisely in its ability to disclose possible futures.

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For Charles Olson, whose opening lines to 'The Resistance' (1950) form one of the epigraphs for this text, this 'eternity', this 'now', this 'foreshortened span' are the gatherings that form the continual process of our bodies, our beings at any given moment; are what we are both reduced to and intensified by, bodies that recall our futures. The final example I want to refer to here approaches the question of how our bodies are engaged in continual re-constructions and disseminations of the past. Ayara Hernández' archive/ installation *Tracing* was the outcome of a project set up to provide an alternative archive of dance, an archive consisting of a number of short documentary films (approximately twenty made between 2008-09) which recorded individuals remembering, without a fixed order, a performance they had seen and wished to recall. (18) In her notebooks Hernández asks:

Can the audience's remembrances be an evidence of performance itself, though? The questions are: What do these traces generate? What sort of a poetic record? Would those remembrances be relevant to the piece of work? What do these documents bring into question? What do they feed back to the work? (2009: n.p.)

The movement of culture, to refer back to Derrida's analysis of the monstrous, is not based on the details of specific pieces of work, which might be described in Benjamin's terms as an



'overwhelming conformism'. It is based on the constant process of recollection, of adapting or (re)placing histories within new and shifting contexts. As with Stein's carafe, 'the difference is spreading.' Hernández' project, and the installation that emerged from it, looks for '[a] memory that co-exists with the present, constantly transforming it', in an attempt to situate a dance history that crosses the physical immediacies of individual bodies in the moment of recording.

From that point of departure, I started to place more emphasis on the process of recalling and forgetting, and on how those testimonies can generate another type of history, an unofficial history. What kind of archive is created from this type of organic documentation, which implies incomplete, fragmented and invented memories? Many times the audience's testimony does not agree with the purpose of the artist. One of the filmed memories, for example, deals with [Raimund Hoghe's 'The Rite of Spring' (2004)] but in no moment does the witness' report account for that. In fact, [she] replaces Stravinsky with Wagner in her memory. Probably she did not record that or had forgotten about that, or never knew that at all; and nevertheless it is a moving report. She chooses that piece of work because it affected her. Therefore, that remembrance, despite being distorted, is related to the dissemination of the work and its becoming. (2009: n.p.)

Hernández' installation consisted of a minimal configuration of chairs and monitors in a dance space each showing a different 'memory' recording. The looped recordings consisted of sound, textual (subtitled) and visual elements. Over the duration of the work, the elements were removed one by one until only silent visual recordings were running. Emphasizing the physicality of memory, what an act of remembering does to the body, the work both generates its own choreographic intensity and suggests that an archive of dance history resides not (only) in authoritative documents, but, also in the recall of sensation and affect that remains in the bodies of witnesses and participants which she calls 'organic documentation':

Organic understood as an interlaced tissue, as a live system. Organic documentation is the record that occurs naturally, that is constituted by what remains from the work, by what is imprinted in the bodies of the participants/ makers of the event, and in the context where it took place, without the need to resort to any other type of device external to the bodies. (2009, n.p.)

Her proposal of 'organic documentation' takes up Rebecca Schneider's archival question of what it is that remains in performance. Schneider argues that the logic of the Western archive limits our understanding of performance to that which does not remain and points to the marginalization of oral and physical traditions where it is precisely what remains or 'leaves residue' (not as 'document', but

as 'flesh in a network of body-to-body transmission of enactment') that gives 'evidence, across generations, of impact.' (Schneider, 2001: 101)

This body, given to performance, is arguably engaged with disappearance chiasmatically – not only disappearing but resiliently eruptive, remaining through performance like so many ghosts at the door marked 'disappeared'. In this sense performance becomes itself through messy and eruptive reappearance, challenging, via the performative trace, any neat antinomy between appearance and disappearance, or presence and absence – the ritual repetitions that mark performance as simultaneously indiscreet, non-original, relentlessly citational, and remaining. (Schneider, 2001: 103)

Schneider also indicates how performance activates 'difference' in Stein's sense, through its continual process of beginning again:

We are also and simultaneously encouraged to articulate the ways in which performance, less bound to the ocular, 'enters' or begins again and again, as Gertrude Stein would write, differently, via itself as repetition – like a copy or perhaps more like a ritual – as an echo in the ears of a confidante, an audience member, a witness.

Hernández asserts that 'memory is not only seen as a trace of the work, but also as a fundamental part of it' which suggests that the re-construction of the work, the physical engagement of the body in the act of remembering, is a part of the work itself that shifts the temporality and reach of the work beyond the unidirectional and a simple actualisation of the past.

In another context, the idea of 'enpresentation' also supports this idea of the dissemination of the work as a constant remaking. The bio-art researcher Tagny Duff has asked how live performance and documentation might be encountered at the level of the cellular and molecular, and proposes a 'viral' interrelation between performance and documentation in the laboratory that is not a 'hierarchical, linear, or historical representation of events as they occurred', but a 'mutual relation evoking liveliness, or eventfulness'. The viral denotes the virus 'as both noun (entity) and verb (movement)' and implies 'viscerality and the movement of the unseen; the uncontained; what is alive and undead'. This approach argues for documentation, not as representation or interpretation, but as in itself productive of liveness. Using the work of van Loon, Duff identifies 'enpresenting' as a method of 'bringing into being' which is neither 'presenting or representing' but rather enfolds performance and documentation into each other to 'generate encounters of liveness' through inscription. (Duff, 2009: 37-40). Perhaps this image of enfolding provides another sense of what looking backwards into the future might disclose - the temporal multi-directionality of bodily experience.



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Looking backwards into the future, then, allows us, in Charles Olson's prescient phrase, to 'take up the fragmented world and find its living connections', (Paul, 1998) not in an attempt to fix things or make them cohere as strategies of modernism which, even when Olson, as perhaps the first declared 'post-modern', was writing in the 1950s, were seen to have failed; but as a means of finding an alternative, a 'radical coherence' with which to live together, or 'how to make of life a shared problem' (Garces, 2009: 159) with the implication that the problem - so often the 'junk of history', the debris and waste of conformity - might at least yield some living shoots.

A radical coherence does not mean conformity. Walter Benjamin's insistence that the articulation of what is past 'does not mean to recognise "how it really was" [but] means to take control of memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger' (Benjamin, 1940: VI) is echoed in Olson's own engagement with the relationship between risk and control. Understood as a continual process of 'opening', finding and using living connections points to a relationship between 'risk and control' that is still within the power of the individual subject. Olson, like Benjamin, found an image, rather than a discursive explanation, 'since only images attempt to gain direct access to *mimesis* - remembrance.' (19).

And the boat, / how he swerves it to avoid the yelping rocks / where the tidal river rushes'  
ABCs (2) (Olson, 1970: n.p.)

But what risks can still be identified in a culture that seeks to control and commodify all aspects of subjectivity and experience? Two more recent views of a stance towards the contemporary might be of use here. Giorgio Agamben in his recent essay 'What is the Contemporary?' explains that:

This means that the contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; he is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times. He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to 'cite it' according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond.' (2009: 53)

Agamben's emphasis here is on the contemporary as risk: the transformation and the ability to 'read history in unforeseen ways'. In contrast Bojana Kunst's view of the contemporary understands its ability to impose an overwhelming conformity on us, to shut down our modes of working together. In order to allow ourselves 'to imagine the potentiality of performance, we have to first erase the notion of the contemporary' since '[t]he moment of our present danger reveals itself exactly through the



violence of constant actualisation, where the process of actualisation is tightly related to the notion of contemporariness, of making work in the present time, a contemporary work' (2008: 6-7)

I have attempted here to gather some thoughts and images, informed by performance, on 'looking backwards into the future' as a complex relationship between the past, memory, reconstruction, the present moment and the yet-to-come; and located an argument for 'looking backwards into the future' as a process of recollection, and in the continual process of de-coupling the descriptive function of the work and (re)asserting that art enacts a complex vector of the past in the present moment, rather than describing a prior reality. Reading the examples of both Nieslony and Hernández through the lens of poetics draws me to reaffirm that the instability and constant shifting between body, object and value that enables us to negotiate the world is what art opens for us from the past, as a disclosure of a conditional future; conditional on our ability to recognise and respond to shifts of attention in the present.

The epiphanic object of modernity, that reveals a sudden moment of insight, Rilke's 'terror we are only just able to bear', reflects a continuing need 'to feel that things are, or once were, that to us' (Schwenger, 2006: 16) - but perhaps the commodified object of post-modernity requires us to move again to Olson's point of resistance: the body (this 'now' which is body, object, history) that must resist not only the catastrophe to which we look backwards, but the catastrophe yet to come. Perhaps the epiphanic is no longer focussed in the object, as Schwenger suggests, but in the relation that is performed between body, object and value. An official dance or performance history might only ever deal with recognisable forms, forms that make sense within a particular apparatus, a particular *dispositif* of that which has been domesticated. To look backwards into the future is perhaps to recognise that the monstrous and the possible still hide in the margins and beneath the surface of our understandings, in the ungraspable appearance of performance.

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## Notes

1. See Allsopp (2009)
2. The primary resources used here are: Abish (1984); Bauer (2010); Garces (2009); Kunst (2008); Rilke (2009); Ranciere (2009); Schwenger (2006).
3. See for example Garces (2009)
4. A point here is that the impact of artwork, or performance or dance, operates also at an individual level. It is not necessarily the visible, critically acclaimed work, (conformist in Benjamin's sense) that shifts attention; but often the marginal (and marginalized) work that speaks to me as individual. In Robert Creeley's words in 'A Sense of Measure' (1964): 'What uses me is what I use and in that complex measure is the issue'.



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5. I deliberately offer no scholarly guarantees that my recollection of these events is either sound or accurate, a point that I think Boris Nieslony at least would appreciate.
6. For a recent discussion of this relationship see Agamben (2009)
7. See additionally Allsopp (1998)
8. See for example the discussion of the etymology of the 'thing' in Heidegger (1971)
9. See Garcés (2009)
10. See Una Bauer's discussion of Raimund Hoghe's use of objects as structuring of emotional response in Bauer (2010).
11. For a further description of Nieslony's performance work and his use of photographs, see Allsopp (2000). The red silk that covers the box of photos is an attribute that already distinguishes it as an object and begins to move it into a separate sphere. For a short discussion of this idea see also Agamben (2009) and his references to the 'sacred' and 'profane'.
12. See *The Odyssey: Nekyia* (Book 11: 38-50): 'Then the ghosts of the dead swarmed out of Erebus - brides, and young men yet unwed, old men worn out with toil, girls once vibrant and still new to grief, and ranks of warriors slain in battle, showing their wounds from bronze-tipped spears, their armour stained with blood. Round the pit from every side the crowd thronged, with strange cries, and I turned pale with fear.'
13. 'old atrocities' - See epigraph to 'The English Garden' from John Ashbery 'Three Poems' in Abish (1984: ...) 'Remnants of the old atrocity subsist, but they are converted into ingenious shifts in scenery, a sort of 'English Garden' effect, to give the required air of naturalness, pathos and hope'.
14. See Evert van Straaten (2008) - 'Never', 1967-2001, Steel, oxidated, 24 x 27 cm.
15. See Beckett (1975)
16. The performance-action was a part of 'Migrations: Process & Performance', Centre for Contemporary Culture, Barcelona (December 2000).
17. Rotman discusses the shift from 'imaginary money' and its semiotic closure in paper money at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and asks 'What sort of money sign has financial capitalism engendered? The answer will be a type of sign that replaces the familiar modern conception of money, that is paper money whose value is its promise of redemption by gold or silver, by a money note which promises nothing but an identical copy of itself; and which determines its value, what it signifies as a sign, in the form of a certain kind of self-reference.' (Rotman, 1993: 5)
18. Ayara Hernández' installation 'Tracing' was shown at Ufer Studios, Uferhallen, Berlin (27 July 2009) as a part of the first HZT Postgraduate Festival.
19. See Lucero-Montano (2007).

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