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## **Enduring Performance: Performer's Notes on *Cabinet of Cynics 1***

### **Performance Concept**

*Cabinet of Cynics 1: Endure* is the first part of a trilogy of performance pieces for stage and screen. A collaboration between performance artist Ioana Jucan and visual artist Rebecca Henriksen, it explores the boundaries and crossings between theatre performance and installation art, as well as ways of inhabiting the territory that emerges between the stage and the screen in live performance. It draws on the resources of theatricality and brings together elements of animation, choreographed movement, video, and sculpture, in order to address a series of questions concerning:

- one's conditions of living: What does it mean for one to fall from a screen on a stage and to habituate oneself to new ways of being not-at-home in-between a screen and a stage?
- one's possibilities of action: What does one do if one wakes up one day in a world that suddenly looks strange though familiar?
- one's attitude towards the world: How can one (continue to) live if one wakes up one day and suddenly realizes that there is something terribly wrong with the world?

Combining theory with life experience and story-telling, *Cabinet of Cynics 1: Endure* is a meditation on how several themes intersect in the contemporary world: habits of thinking and rituals of living characteristic of the capitalist form of life; relationships and how they work (or don't) today; freedom and dependence; and endurance as a paradoxical knotting together of the immutable and the possibility of change.

### **A (Theatrical) Position**

The performance piece<sup>1</sup> deliberately approaches these themes from a specific position: that of the figure of the cynic, with its double valence.

Present-day cynicism presupposes a relation of cruel optimism, as defined by Lauren Berlant: cruel optimism is “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic” (Berlant, 2011, 24). At play here is a chronic sense of stuckness – chronic because it is a matter

of a “disease of time” (Berlant, 2011, 103). But present-day cynicism is more than this. In Peter Sloterdijk’s words (1987, 5), “present-day cynics are borderline melancholics, who can keep their symptoms of depression under control and can remain more or less able to work.” Thus, the present-day cynic is depressed but not so depressed as not to be able to work: s/he remains caught up in the capitalist system of excessive production and helps keep it running.

Paulo Virno sees cynicism as the defining “emotional situation” of the post-Fordist world – not “a passing psychological rippling, but a characteristic relation with one’s own being in the world” (Virno, 2004, 87). Cynicism arises as a reaction to the constant and seemingly inescapable encounter with immaterial signs and abstractions in daily life as well as to “the chronic instability of forms of life and linguistic games” (Virno, 2004, 87) characteristic of the late capitalist form of life. More specifically, “at the base of contemporary cynicism lies the fact that men and women first of all experience rules, far more often than ‘facts,’ and far earlier than they experience concrete events” (Virno, 2004, 87). At play here is a temporary, yet repeated, refusal and even inability to “inhabit the midst of life” (to extrapolate Nigel Thrift’s expression; 2008, 14), to insistently inhabit the world in the present moment. Sloterdijk links this condition to a structure of constant postponement at the heart of the late capitalist system of excessive production.<sup>2</sup> He writes:

On earth, existence has “nothing to search for” except itself, but where cynicism rules, we search for everything, but not for existence (*Dasein*). Before we “really live,” we always have just one more [thing] to attend to, just one more precondition to fulfill, just one more temporarily more important wish to satisfy, just one more account to settle. And with this just one more and one more and one more arises the structure of postponement and indirect living that keeps the system of excessive production going. The latter, of course, always knows how to present itself as an unconditionally “good end” that deludes us with its light as though it were a real goal but that whenever we approach it recedes once more into the distance. (Sloterdijk, 1987, 194)

To search for existence, to “really live,” means to let things be, to allow them to happen, without seeking to constantly predetermine their being.

Yet, there is another dimension to the figure of the cynic of interest in *Cabinet of Cynics*. An exquisite embodiment of it is Diogenes – possibly one of the first performance artists of all times. Diogenes: the “world citizen,” outsider yet belonging to the (in fact, any) present situation,

“plebeian, realistic, sensually joyful,” the one who enjoys to “leap into life” (Sloterdijk, 1987, 194, 178, 179). Diogenes: the one with presence of mind and minimal needs (Sloterdijk, 1987, 169). Diogenes: the master of literalness, the being bent upon – and maybe caught up in – concreteness as well as upon/in the reality of movement. Kierkegaard captures this dimension of the figure in the beginning of his book on *Repetition* as follows:

Diogenes, as everybody knows, stepped forth as an opponent. He *stepped* forth literally, for he said not a word, but merely walked several times back and forth, thinking that thereby he had sufficiently refuted those [Eleatic, movement-denying] philosophers. (Kierkegaard, 1941, 3; brackets added)

As a side note, this position, Diogenes’s, is indeed a political one, only that politics now comes to be understood as “that activity in which one has to be ready for anything” (Sloterdijk, 1987, 169), and also ready to contest anything that does not feel quite right.

The figure of the cynic, with its double valence, is intimately imbricated with performance. For instance, Erwin Goffman identifies two extremes of the belief in the part one is playing (Goffman, 1956, 10-11), of the belief in one’s own performance. One extreme he terms “sincere:” this is the case when the performer is taken in by her/his performance. The other he terms “cynical:” this is the case when “the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience” (Goffman, 1956, 10). But these two directions map quite neatly onto the two valences of the figure of the cynic as described earlier. The first has to do with what performers sometimes call “being in the moment” – in other words, being truthful to one’s own doing, caught up with(in) the concrete situation one exists in at a given moment. The second one involves taking a distance from one’s own doing while doing it, and yet continuing to do it.

Both these directions intersect in performance art, which, as Annette Arlander justly observes (2011, 8-10), has a particular concern with the self – either as self-portraiture or through the use of the self as material to create performances. Either way, in performance art the self becomes a framing device and its performance gets enacted in the stretch that opens between the aforementioned two dimensions of the figure of the cynic.

### **Some Concepts in Performance (A beginning)**

*Cabinet of Cynics 1: Endure* takes performance and performance art seriously. The piece evokes and enacts the aforementioned senses of the figure of the cynic – some more subtly, others more explicitly – in order to gesture towards (potentially) different ways of being in these late (late?) capitalist times. Some of these ways of being are complicit with the capitalist form of life, while others are resistant to it – or, at least, they appear so.

The performance piece begins with a quotation from Peter Handke's play *Voyage to the Sonorous Land*, projected on the two screens that mark two of the boundaries of the performance space:

ACTOR If there is anything I've known since I was a child, without the help of a teacher, it is that there is nothing in this world one can *have*; not you, not anyone. I am an enthusiastic have-not. (Handke, 1996, 15)

This condition, of the actor as have-not, brings to mind Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's insights into "The Paradox of the Actor" as defined by Diderot:

One must oneself be nothing, have nothing proper to oneself except an equal aptitude for all sorts of things, roles, characters, functions, and so on. The paradox states a law of impropriety, which is also the very law of mimesis: only a man without qualities, the being without properties or specificity, the subjectless subject (absent from himself) is able to present or produce the general. (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989, 258-9)

At play here is a practice of the self involving a finding (of oneself) that is also a leaving (an absenting from one's self, from one's subjecthood). It is a way of being in the moment – being without the will to possess (possession and possessing(s) are at the heart of capitalism), without laying property claims to what one encounters, to what one experiences. It is also a mode of being open to what there is. Such a way of being has been a horizon, an aspiration, in the creation process of *Cabinet of Cynics 1: Endure*. The movement onstage, in-between the two screens displaying videos of the two other performers playing "I" (who only appear onscreen); the use of objects in the performance; the interaction between the Performer-I (played by myself) and the Non-Performer (played by Rebecca Henriksen) onstage; all these grew out of an experimentation with what being without having, without the will to possess, might mean and how it may be enacted in live performance.

It also grew out of experimentation with yet another way of being, in tension with the first. This is a way of being predicated upon calculation, the predetermination of what is to come, the



constant negotiation with the others. It is instantiated in practices pervasive today, such as (to point out but a few): list-making as a mode of organizing daily life; negotiating with others how one spends one's time together with them; calculating costs and benefits in one's relationships with others; (economic, scientific, etc.) modeling<sup>3</sup> and risk assessment; “the manipulation of genetic systems; pesticides; growth hormones, the rapid exhaustion of species too costly to genetically manipulate (e.g., marine life)” (Crocker, 2001, 64); and so on.

*Cabinet of Cynics 1: Endure* seeks to put into play these two ways of being at two different levels (or scales). At the level of the individual, it follows several – sometimes intersecting, yet always incomplete – storylines: for instance, that of a woman's dilemma as to whether to give birth to her child in a world with which there is something plainly wrong; the dilemma of what to do with a three-billion dollar coin accidentally found in the street (searched for by the police and state authorities) and the (cynical?) decision to make a wish and throw it in the water. The other is the level of nature and the environment (broadly construed), damaged under the pressures of capital (the issue of toxic waste, for instance, is present in the piece). It has to do with the forces that keep things together and those that break them apart. Styrofoam, used in various ways (as musical instrument, as disintegrating matter, as hyperobject, as stand-in for a baby, as material for the Citizen of the World sculptural object, etc.) and acquiring a metaphorical dimension throughout the performance, is one of the links between these two levels.

The theme of endurance, with its multiple senses, is another link. It appears in the performance's concern with enduring objects that pose ecological threats. These are human-made objects that won't go away. Timothy Morton calls them “hyperobjects” and describes them as follows in a citation re-cited in *Cabinet of Cynics 1*:

Alongside global warming, “hyperobjects” will be our lasting legacy. Materials from humble Styrofoam to terrifying plutonium will far outlast current social and biological forms. We are talking about hundreds and thousands of years. Five hundred years from now, polystyrene objects such as cups and takeout boxes will still exist. Ten thousand years ago, Stonehenge didn't exist. Ten thousand years from now, plutonium will still exist. Hyperobjects do not rot in our lifetimes. They do not burn without themselves burning. (Morton, 2010, 130)

And then there is the question of how nature and the self can endure in the face of such enduring (often toxic) threats. The sense of endurance at play here is that of continuing, or persisting

through time, in spite of – and, perhaps, because of – transformation and change. The subject who is nothing, the have-not, the subjectless subject who finds oneself by leaving one's self behind, endures in this sense of endurance: s/he/it persists (only) by way of transformation and change.

It should be no surprise that the enduring subjectless subject is (potentially) the performer, the actor *par excellence*. For, as it became apparent to me in the creation process of *Cabinet of Cynics I*, endurance is at the heart of performance. It has to do with a non-linear temporality in which to be present, to be in the moment, means to be both anchored in the concrete and open towards the general, where concreteness defines an “orientation to the historical,” as Theodor Adorno conceived of it (through Benjamin; Adorno, 1991, 226), but the historical plays out within a specific form of life. In other words, to be present, to be in the moment, means being both backwards and forwards, at the same (non-linear) time. Rebecca Schneider perhaps gestures towards this idea in her *Performing Remains*, in which she thinks through “remains” not solely “as object or document material, but also as the immaterial labor of bodies engaged in and with that incomplete past: bodies striking poses, making gestures, voicing calls, reading words, singing songs, or standing witness” (Schneider, 2011, 33).

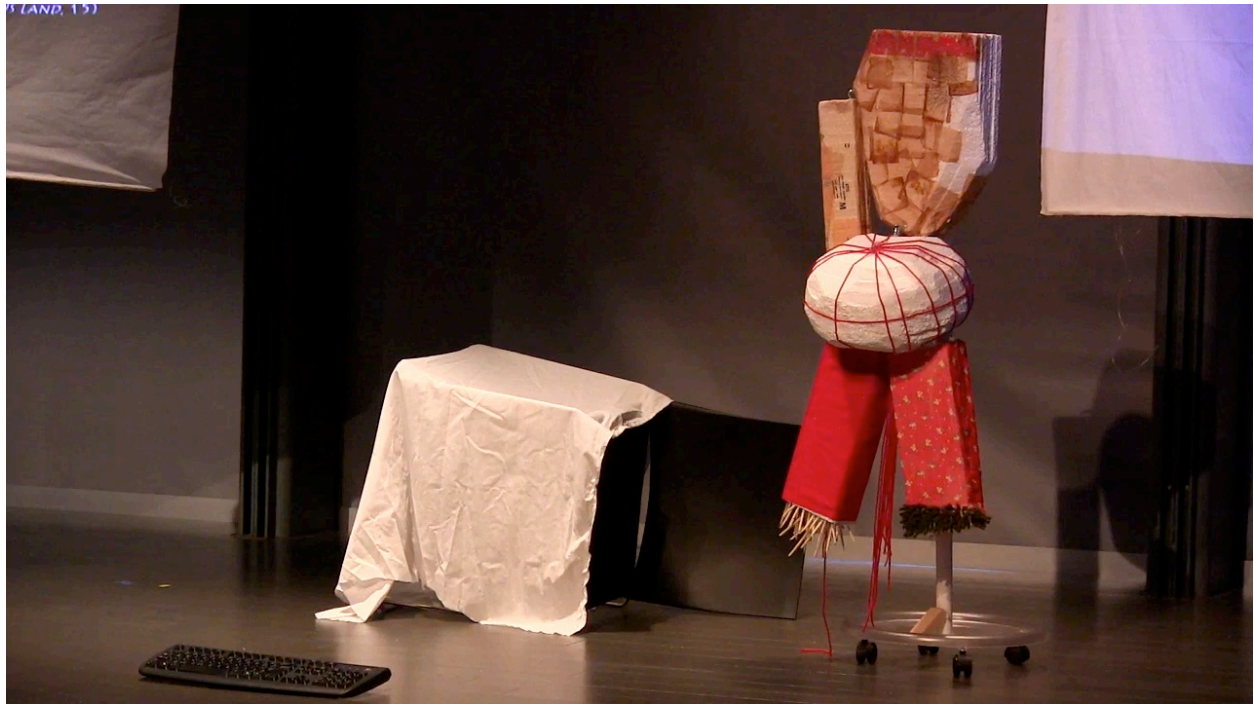
The performer's labor is indeed immaterial, sometimes to the point of her/his exhaustion (as is the case in *Cabinet of Cynics I*): it consists in the performance worker's “capacities to make something out of nothing” (Schneider, 2012, 156-7).<sup>4</sup> And it is a form of labor performed at the level of subjectivity, for “the ‘raw material’ of immaterial labor is subjectivity and the ‘ideological’ environment in which this subjectivity lives and reproduces” (Lazzarato, online). In this regard, the form of work the performer engages in seemingly coincides with the dominant form of labor in contemporary post-Fordist times – “immaterial labor” (according to scholars like Maurizio Lazzarato). Yet, maybe there is potential in this form of labor not yet actualized in these post-Fordist times in which immaterial labor is used to keep the late capitalist system predicated upon profit-making running. This hypothesis remains to be further explored, maybe in another performance.

### **A Call to Endurance (Excerpted from the performance)**

*We make things last but not things that we do with each other or for each other. They're called relationships. Like styrofoam – make it go away and you can't. But you and me together – make*

*us last, and you can't. Because if I make myself a gift to you and you a gift to me we just end up possessing each other. And if we do end up lasting together, it's because we use each other so much that we get used to each other. It's all a negotiation. Let's have a conversation. Talk past midnight and delight in each other's words and make love till dawn. No, no, no. We fear we might get lost in an infinite conversation. Who we are gets lost, we fear. So we continue to lay claim to each other as though we were each other's property. So we break up. But have we ever been together? It's disgusting how explicit I have come to be.*

### **Re-placing an End (To be continued)**



Cabinet 1\_Citizen of the World (Sculptural object made of styrofoam)



Cabinet 1\_Performer-I and Citizen of the World



Cabinet 1\_The body at work





Cabinet 1\_Birthing styrofoam



Cabinet 1\_A call to endurance, with styrofoam





Cabinet 1\_Styrofoam, disintegrating



Cabinet 1\_Performer's body laboring in-between screens





Cabinet 1\_Performer-I with 3 billion dollar coin in hand



Cabinet 1\_Blending images, between stage and screen

All photos @ Rebecca Henriksen

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As a side-note, the title of the trilogy, *Cabinet of Cynics*, is inspired by the title of a section of Peter Sloterdijk's book, *Critique of Cynical Reason*.

<sup>2</sup> Sloterdijk wrote these thoughts in the early 1980s but his insights, I suggest, are still relevant today.

<sup>3</sup> Models, like global climate models, for example, are supposed to both explain and predict. They supposedly help us to make sense of a world that is increasingly complex and to cope with its unpredictability – or, in other words, with its constant crises. The blurb for a course on Model Thinking to be offered on the online courses platform *coursera* this summer emphasizes that “people who think with models consistently outperform those who don't” (Page, 2013, online). In other words, models “make us better thinkers,” for:

Models help us to better organize information – to make sense of that fire hose or hairball of data (choose your metaphor) available on the Internet. Models improve our abilities to make accurate forecasts. They help us make better decisions and adopt more effective strategies. They even can improve our ability to design institutions and procedures. (Page, 2013, online)

And, by helping us make “better decisions,” they also give us the sense (or illusion) of being sovereign subjects.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to deny, however, that this labor is performed through the workers' bodies, which are not immaterial.

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