

ENACTIVISM AND PERFORMANCE ART: PUTTING ON DISPLAY OUR PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT. Seeing, according to the enactive approach, is not something that happens inside our brain, rather it is something we do, but, as I will argue thanks to the performance art, it is something we do together. The performing arts, with their characteristics – autopoietic feedback loop, spectator/performer exchange, oscillation of the dichotomous subject-object pair - constitute a model through which to investigate the nature of our perception, which is constitutively relational, participative, and transformative.

Keywords: enactivism, performing arts, perception, enactive loneliness, transformation.

Perceiving as a way of acting together

Perception, according to the enactive approach, is not something that happens inside our brain, rather it is something we do; it rests on the background of our sensorimotor abilities and it is constrained by our environment and socio-cultural context; in this sense, it is much more similar to climbing a tree or reading a book than to a digestive process. Despite some significant differences, it is correct to say that several authors working in the field of the enactive approach agree in opposing the idea that by perceiving we make internal representations.

Starting from Varela-Thompson-Rosch's seminal work of 1991, *The Embodied Mind*, the main polemic target of the authors related to the enactive approach is represented by the computational model of mind. This model constitutes the pivot of classical cognitivism which, since the 1950s, has been assumed by default as the approach to conceiving cognition within the science of the mind.

According to the enactive approach, external objects are not exclusively stimuli that trigger internal events affecting the nervous system; rather, they constitute opportunities for our dynamic interaction with them. The world, then, does not manifest itself to us as an image in the head but as a playground for our activity. Here, we do not mean the activity of the brain but the activity of an embodied mind that involves the whole of animal life. The brain obviously plays an important but not exclusive role in this dynamic and distributed relationship involving the eye-brain-head-body-ground-environment system.

Particularly interesting for my reflection is that, according to the enactive approach, the world does not open up to our observation for free, simply offering itself to our eyes – as in Ernst Mach's famous illustration that perfectly captures the snapshot

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conception of perception – but presents itself to us only if we actively bring skills and competencies into play.

The paradigm that the American philosopher Alva Noë suggests to adopt, and which well characterizes the temporal nature of our perceptive experience, is that of the blind man who, with his cane, through trials and attempts, comes to orient himself within the surrounding environment. This paradigm, by rendering the tactile nature of our vision in accordance with the intuition of Merleau-Ponty, allows us to consider the field of our experience as always indeterminate and never completely circumscribable. The world presents itself to us only through adjustments, remodulations of contact styles, and negotiations. Our perception, in this sense, is extremely fragile and always to be reconstructed through revisable attempts. As I will try to highlight, the point is that we do indeed gropingly unfold our perceptual experience over time along the lines of the tactile exploration developed by the blind man with his cane, but we do not do so relying exclusively on our solitary attempts, rather we do so resting, from the very beginning, on a socio-cultural scaffold that supports and directs us. Our process of perceptual exploration is not to be understood as predetermined, it certainly depends on what we do or what we are ready to do, but we are not alone in our attempt to focus the world. The perceptual experience is an achievement as Noë says but, as I will try to emphasize using the model provided by the performing arts, it is not a solitary achievement.

Seeing is a way of acting that is articulated through an intricate series of sensorimotor modalities, interactions, tools, practices, institutions. Only in this tangle we can find ourselves.

It seems to me, as I will try to bring out, that the performative arts constitute an exemplary model through which to observe our dynamic interactions with the environment, our styles of access, in short, our way of establishing contact with the world. In order to attempt to shed light on how the performance arts put our perception on display, I will first critique Noë's "lonely" approach to perception through the analysis of an example related to a live work he used in his 2015 essay, *Strange Tools*, and secondly, I will use the theoretical tools provided by German performance art scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte.

In the comparison between the performing arts and Noë's proposal, the limits of the latter will emerge, as well as the clear similarities between the demands of the live arts and radical enactivism, including its relative alliances, as well defined by Daniel Hutto¹, with autopoietic orientation, ecological psychology, and Material Engagement Theory. I will not refer directly to this system of alliances here, but rather I will exclusively develop a comparison between Noë's proposal, although it has changed significantly over time, and the performing arts, in the conviction that productive ideas can emerge.

¹ Daniel D. Hutto and Erik Myin, *Evolving Enactivism: Basic Minds Meet Content*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017, p. 75

Performing arts challenge enactive loneliness

It seems to me that Noë, in briefly mentioning the live work of Tino Sehgal presented at the Venice Biennale 2013, misses a valuable opportunity to include in his reflection, among other things that I will try to focus on, an intersubjective dimension. According to Erika Fischer-Lichte, the main characteristic of the performative would be precisely that of dynamizing oppositions and unhinging crystallized models, but it seems that Noë's proposal is impermeable to this destabilizing force.

The point is that, as I will try to highlight in this paragraph, the perceptive experience that is put on display in an exemplary way by the performing arts, in my opinion, does not rest exclusively, as Noë's proposal seems to imply, on a sensorimotor level but also on an intersubjective and socio-cultural one. This is a problem that afflicts Noë's reflection and that has its roots in his previous works even if it is clear that the American philosopher has tried to amend his proposal over the years.

In order to develop my reflection, I start from "the lonely world of the enactive perceiver" of which the philosopher Shaun Gallagher speaks in reference to the sensorimotor approach developed by Noë who

fails to make any mention of intersubjectivity, or social perception, or to make any acknowledgment that object perception is different from person perception, or that our encounters with others might contribute to the sensorimotor capacities that are

so important for enactive perception. Is there not an important sense in which we learn from others what to look for and how to manipulate and understand things?²

Noë's account of perception is focused on what Gallagher calls the «mechanical dynamics»³ of object-perception where issues of intersubjectivity do not find room. Although the critique is addressed to the 2004 essay, *Action in Perception*, it seems to be entirely relevant to the latter text as well, although, as I have already mentioned, Noë has tried to reshape his proposal.

Gallagher even goes so far as to say that in Noë's enactive address the idea that there are other people in the world does not even seem to be contemplated. His critique hinges on an example that Noë uses in order to get rid of the model of internal representations. Noë, in describing his attempt to reach a castle – Gallagher ironically hypothesizes that it could be the castle of Edinburgh, the city where Noë's dear friend Andy Clark lives – considers two solutions: to consult a map or to look around and if the castle is visible, to start walking keeping an eye on it. Noë adopts the second solution but misses, according to Gallagher, to consider a third option, that is to ask for directions: Edinburgh is full of people to ask for information and among them there is also Noë's dear friend, Andy Clark.

This problematic aspect of Noë's proposal is even more evident when his analysis comes into contact, albeit marginally, with the performing arts, which instead require a perspective that takes into account, among other things, the intersubjective dimension.

² Gallagher, Shaun, *Intersubjectivity in perception*, in *Continental Philosophy Review* 41, 2008, p.178

³ *Ibidem*

Before moving on to the example related to the performing arts, I think it's worth considering first of all a central theoretical place in Noë's reflection. The American philosopher supports the idea that our perception is an achievement that depends on the skills and competencies that we are ready to put at stake. In order to define the kind of achievement linked to our perceptual experience, which allows him to account for the shift from not seeing to seeing or seeing differently, Noë uses, on several occasions, an example that I think is very effective. When we enter an art gallery, we first perceive the artworks on display as indistinct; like faces we meet for the first time at a party, they all look the same, we find it hard to bring them into focus. Only later on, because we are captured by a particular characteristic, intrigued by the title, or because a friend of us points out some aspects, we will be able, by means of sensorimotor adjustments, to establish contact with a work of art and thus define relationships of similarities and differences. The support provided by Noë's friend in the above example is, however, accidental and certainly does not constitute a central element in his analysis. The encounter with the artwork takes place in Noë almost in the absence of socio-cultural support, in fact, the environment, as it is characterized, seems to be exclusively physical. The problem that I would like to highlight is that the axis of his proposal seems to revolve essentially around the sensorimotor models, leaving out, as I have already mentioned, the intersubjective dimension.

On the basis of this premise, and thanks to Shaun Gallagher's insights to which I have referred, I will try to argue my critique by examining the brief mention that Noë makes in *Strange Tools* to the live work of Tino Sehgal, where, in my view, *the lonely world of the enactive perceiver* comes to the fore. Rather, it seems to me that Sehgal's live piece functions as a *mise en abyme* of our joint ability to access the world.

In this "constructed situation", as Sehgal likes to define his live pieces, a small group of people sits on the floor of a room in the Giardini Della Biennale; one of the performers makes sounds, produces a faint rhythm while the others react to these stimuli by moving their bodies through small movements. The performers are in a condition of mutual listening and, not marginally, as Noë himself notes, one has the impression that «they imitate each other, but not quite directly, always as if going to some basic core quality of a movement or feeling»⁴. From time to time some performers enter and others leave. Although the movements seem to be governed by the principle of improvisation, the whole system is presented as perfectly organized.

As Noë writes:

When you enter the gallery, the piece hardly jumps out at you. There are people on the floor moving slowly, making noise, but there are dozens of visitors milling around them. The piece is sort of invisible at first, just as it is unclear what, if any, logic or rule governs what is going on. My first response was to find the work uninteresting and to want to move on. Gradually

⁴ Alva Noë. *Strange Tools*, Hill and Wang, New York, 2015, p.80

the piece comes into focus, and when I left, about an hour and a half later, I felt that I had gotten to know something definite and particular, a thing, this art thing.⁵

This live piece suits perfectly Noë's reflection that the general form of the artwork is "see me if you can". Sehgal's work «dares you to try, to look hard enough so that you can»⁶. Thanks to this example it is possible to observe that characteristic shift of our perceptive experience from not seeing to seeing or seeing differently. Noë, in fact, only after an extended commitment over time comes to identify the performers. The inability to distinguish the performers among the crowd requires from the visitor an effort that, although it is usually under trace, we constantly make in our everyday experience to focus the object of our perception. In this sense, Sehgal's live piece responds to Noë's idea that «one of art's tasks is to afford us the opportunity to catch ourselves in the act of encountering the world»⁷. The problem is that this encounter does not occur in a solitary mode. What Noë fails to grasp is that perceptual experience develops *with* and *through* others. The sensorimotor models adopted by the other visitors and performers, their disposition in the space that functions as a ostensive gesture⁸, the negotiation of the object of attention, the different styles of access – sitting for a long time to observe, exchanging impressions with those next to us, making a phone call and taking a fleeting glance, approaching the performers to the point of crossing the zone of intimacy – all contribute constitutively and not incidentally to

defining the perceptive experience. In this sense, Noë's reference to the impression that the performers imitate each other seems to lead the reflection towards a more promising outcome. I believe that Sehgal's work provides an opportunity to grasp ourselves in the act of accessing the world through styles that we have – also – learned, that we imitate: we are all imitating, with different degrees of autonomy, others. Noë does not seem to catch himself in the act of imitating and being imitated. The question of imitation that he identifies by analyzing the movement of performers is never only about performers; this is what performance art should teach us.

The perceptive experience that emerges on the occasion provided by Sehgal's live piece does certainly concern, according to Noë, the game of sensorimotor adjustments between the bodies of the performers and the spectator – problematic opposition that as we will see should collapse in reference to an enactive approach and in particular to performance art but that subsists in Noë's analysis – but also, not marginally, to the game of relationships between visitors who, with their more or less active participation, make themselves potentially available to any kind of interaction belonging to the family of "Excuse me, How do I get to the castle?".

Here there isn't merely at stake a relation between a subject and an object, but rather a space in which it is dynamically and collectively possible to produce a performance through what Erika Fischer-Lichte, as I will deepen in the next paragraph, defines an autopoietic feedback loop.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Alva Noë. *Strange Tools*, p.102

⁷ Ivi, p.80

⁸ Cf. Daniel D. Hutto and Erik Myin, *Evolving Enactivism: Basic Minds Meet Content*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017, pp.171-176

What Sehgal's live work opens up is precisely this space of relationship between bodies that transform each other. Noë misses the point: here the issue at stake is not only to focus the object of one's own perception but to grasp oneself in a system of relationships from within the relationship itself in which the subject-object poles are dynamized. The problem then is that, as we shall see, Noë does not accept the challenge of the performing arts.

Enacting the transformation

In her 2004 essay *The Transformative Power of Performance: a New Aesthetics*, Erika Fischer-Lichte, assuming a position that is not flattened on Performance Studies but rather develops in the field of theatre studies, defines a series of conceptual tools that are extremely productive for the purposes of my reflection. I will dwell here particularly on the notion of the autopoietic feedback loop she coined.

In the opening of her essay, the German scholar examines Marina Abramovich's performance, *Lips of Thomas*, presented at the Krinziger Gallery in Innsbruck on October 24th, 1975. Erika Fischer-Lichte uses this example as a paradigmatic model of the performative turn that became established in Western culture from the early 1960s. The Yugoslavian naturalized American artist, on that occasion, developed a series of actions that were not intended to represent a fictional world but rather to transform her own bodily state and the condition of the spectators. Entering the space, Marina Abramovic, first of all, stripped off her clothes, then hung a photo on the back wall, sat at a table eating a one-kilo jar of honey, drank a bottle of

wine from a crystal goblet which she then shattered with her right hand, thus beginning to bleed. The actions of self-referral continued with the engraving on the belly of a five-pointed star and with the practice of self-flagellation. At this point the artist stretched herself out on blocks of ice and remained, in pain, in that position for about half an hour until the public intervened, taking her away and thus ending the performance.

What the audience and the performer jointly gave life to on that occasion was an event that did not fall within the standards of the figurative arts nor of the theatrical arts. The spectators, once the usual models of behavior to which to refer collided, sank into a state of deep crisis. They constituted themselves therefore not only as percipient and thinking subjects but also as subjects capable of action. Their previously unplanned and unplannable action, which consisted of active engagement in the construction of the performative event, involved the modification of the object of their own experience through a dynamic in which agency was spread.

Interestingly, a conception of the perceptual modality that must necessarily resort to an image of the percipient subject as essentially active is on display here. As can be guessed and as we will see better in a moment, the notion of subject, understood as a crystallized term in opposition to an already given object, is certainly not safe in this context.

Starting from the analysis of *Lips of Thomas*, Erika Fischer-Lichte shows how, within the performance, some dichotomous pairs – subject-object, seeing-touching, body-mind – oscillate until they collapse. Here we do not witness the opposition between a

subject to which is attributed all the cognitive-experiential load and an object devalued of any value, rather through the exchange actor-spectator we are witnesses not of a simple reversal but of a dynamic movement that makes us lose track of the subject and the object understood as polarized terms.

As Erika Fischer-Lichte states:

Through this process, the relationship between subject and object was established not as dichotomous but as oscillatory. The positions of subject and object could no longer be clearly defined or distinguished from one another.⁹

What therefore produces the performative event is a dense weave of interactions that Erika Fischer-Lichte defines as autopoietic feedback loop. This notion, which makes explicit reference to the work of biologists Umberto Maturana and Francisco Varela – landmarks of enactivism –, defines that «self-referential, autopoietic system enabling a fundamentally open, unpredictable process»¹⁰. The autopoietic feedback loop works as a self-organizing system, within which new unplanned elements are continuously integrated and emerge from time to time. It is essentially constituted by the actions and reactions of the participants in the event and, although it is precisely performance art that thematizes it, it is present in a minimal form in every spectacular event, even the most formalized.

Precisely because all participants – actors and spectators – are included within a system in progress that produces itself, the performance arts offer everyone the opportunity to undergo change and transform themselves. Erika Fischer-Lichte's reflection on this last aspect is related to Victor Turner's anthropology and his notion of "liminality" developed in the context of research on rituals with reference to Arnold van Gennep's work. The latter in his famous study of 1909, *Rites of Passage*, analyzing a large number of ethnological materials, defines the transitional rites through three phases: 1) the phase of separation in which the subject who is to be transformed is removed from his daily condition; 2) the threshold phase or transformation, where the subject is placed in the condition of experiencing completely new experiences; 3) the phase of incorporation, where the transformed subject returns to his daily life. Victor Turner defines the threshold state as a state of liminality, from the Latin *limen*, which consists of a kind of transient existence «betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial»¹¹.

It is the *between* the privileged category within the autopoietic loop that produces performance; what is at stake here is the experience of the threshold, of the passage, the crossing of pre-established positions, the disruption of the stability of binary oppositions, the metamorphosis, the

⁹ Fischer-Lichte, Erika, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2004; translated in English by Saskya Jain, *The Transformative Power of Performance: a new Aesthetics*, Routledge 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, 2008, p.17

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 39

¹¹ Turner, Victor, *The Ritual Process – Structure and Anti-Structure*, London and New York: Routledge, 1969, p. 95

mutation of one's own condition. In the performance arts, unlike rites of passage, it is not a matter of considering «the transition *to* something and the resulting transformation *into* this or that»¹² rather it is about the transformative power of the passage itself.

The interesting cue offered by the performing arts model is the fact that the actor and the spectator do not modify, exclusively and separately, respectively, their own bodily state and the content of their perceptual experience. By transformation here we mean, more radically, the grasping oneself within a relationship in which one participates in the dynamization of the subject-object polarization that also entails, but as a secondary and local effect, a mutation of the perceptual experience and thus the shift from not seeing to seeing of which Noë speaks. Here, then, it does not make sense to speak of users and producers; rather, it is more legitimate to speak of co-producers who actively participate in the configuration of the performance without having full power to determine every aspect of it. Actors and spectators, then, with their actions and reactions «constitute elements of the feedback loop, which in turn generates the performance itself»¹³.

Performance art puts on display an essential condition of our perceptual experience: we are constitutively in *betwixt and between*; we are originally immersed in a transformation in which we are never alone. It is precisely in the space of crossing that we can catch ourselves acting our perception, bring it forth, develop it over time,

piece by piece, and not dispose of it as if it were ready to use, off the shelf, simply to contemplate as in the snapshot model.

Social place/place of focused perception

Towards the end of her essay, Erika Fischer-Lichte reflects on how the introduction of certain theatrical techniques in the mid-19th century was aimed at characterizing the theatrical space as a *place of focused perception* rather than a *social place*. The German scholar refers in particular to the techniques of darkening of the auditorium, which isolated the spectator and directed the economy of attention, thus determining precise criteria for the selection of sensory impressions. A few centuries later, overcoming this dichotomy of *social place/place of focused perception*, performance art, in my opinion, opens a space that is a *place of focused perception precisely because it is a social place*.

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¹² Fischer-Lichte, Erika, *The Transformative Power of Performance: a new Aesthetics*, p. 199

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