

**how
does
the
stage
work?**

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**This .pdf can be read vertically on a phone.
For the best reading experience, please
disable screen rotation.**

1.

The question is:

What cultural, ideological and practical forces shape our understanding of the contemporary stage, and how could we take those forces into account in our artistic work?

This is a book for the performance maker. It explores the relationship between our daily artistic choices, the western contemporary stage, and the place of contemporary performance in a larger cultural context.

The main focus is on the stage: an area of study that concerns, but doesn't fit within the borders of any individual artistic practice, such as choreography, directing, dramaturgy or design, the latter of which I consider my area of relative expertise.

It started as project to collect and archive working methods that I have developed, together with my colleagues, during the making of dance and theatre performances. While theory does play a part and the work of many thinkers is referenced, the questions that this book is trying to address arise from my somewhat hands-on artistic work. Academic writing this is not.

This book / slideshow can be read from cover to cover, or flipped through like a travel guide or a cook book.

Like a travel guide, it can be used for planning future adventures, or when you're already 'on the road' and fully immersed in the artistic process. It can be used as a companion for revisiting past works, or the works of others.

Like a cook book, it treats contemporary performance making not only as a processual and mystical practice - there is room for that too - but as a craft that has its own ingredients and techniques.

The book is divided into five parts.

1

The first part, this part, provides the reader with a few possible entry points into the book.

2

In the second part, we will examine how different ideologies, histories and modes of knowledge affect the way performances are made.

The third part goes more specifically into the role and possibilities of design as a shared and processual practice in the contemporary stage context.

3

4 In the fourth part, we will examine how objects behave on the stage. We'll dive deeper into the questions of representation, materiality and contemporaneity - and how they manifest themselves differently in theatre and choreography.

The fifth part is a looser compilation of 'tips & tricks' for making amazing performances. Start [here](#) if you're in the mood for a snack rather than a meal.

5

1.2

This book can be thought of as a work of speculative non-fiction. What this means is that I would recommend approaching this, often self-contradicting book not as a coherent theory of how performances are, but as something to make and think performances with. The speculative attitude opens up a world of imagination, which in turn opens up the possibility for change in how we make and experience art.

In writing this, I apply a similarly imaginative strategy. I have chosen to write in English not (only) because of some vain and unrealistic expectations about the wide reach of my work, but because the other language gives me space to approach this work as a performance, something that is not completely removed from fiction.

The proximity of fiction is present throughout this book.

First, we will start with the somewhat fictional proposition that within the pages of this book, there is a a thing called 'we', as if we were sharing real time and space together. As if this was a performance.

This 'we' is not based on us having shared features, positions or privileges. I am a white, early-middle aged cis man, and while I have worked in many explicitly intersectional and decolonial projects that centralise Blackness, most notably those initiated by Sonya Lindfors, my writing will contain a lot of biases that I have yet to unlearn.

This 'we' is not based on us having shared goals either, although I hope that we share a desire to get better at making performances, whatever it means to you. At the bare minimum, it should mean learning to make more inclusive performances that expand what is imaginable.

Secondly, we will start with the assumption that nothing that takes place on the contemporary stage is natural or authentic, and even the most austere staging of contemporary dance should be approached with the same vigilance as a Hollywood movie, as it is just as soaked in ideology, and just as prone to be "working in the service of certain class interests* ".

This doesn't mean that all works of art are the same and should be approached with only scrutiny and hostility! On the contrary, I hope that embracing the idea that nothing is natural will **not just replace naivete with cynicism, but allow us to experience and create art with greater love and understanding. An important subplot is learning to see the whiteness, maleness, affluence and access to education, on which the contemporary western concept of neutral is built, as anything but neutral.**

I hope that this book could help anyone working with the contemporary stage to examine their own work with a combination of criticality, enthusiasm and tenderness.

1.3

“What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.”*

How art forms relations with the rest of the world, and its events from Black Lives Matter to the climate crisis, is not only defined by the themes and topics that our works publicly address. Instead, the political potential of art is baked into the everyday choices we make while making it - the props we choose to buy, the music we choose to play, the language we choose to use, the stereotypes we choose repeat, the way we choose to organise, the price we choose to charge for the tickets and so on. Not all of these choices are equally available to all of us, but I hope that this book could help us identify the political potential of the choices we are able to make in our own practice.

* Hannah Arendt: Human Condition

In capitalism, we often equate being able to choose with freedom. For the (white, western, male) artist, this has often meant the freedom to choose what your work is and is not about, the freedom to use anything as material, or the freedom to choose to stay out of politics. When this exclusive and narrow definition of “artistic freedom” is put into question, often by other artists and activists whose actual freedom might be under threat, the responses can get pretty aggressive, probably because artists have often been conditioned to defend their concept of freedom even if it is flawed.

In this book I would like to promote another type of artistic freedom, something that feminist thinkers and writers have demanded for decades. A freedom not to, but from “thoughtlessness - the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of 'truths'”.* A freedom not **from, but **of** agency, competence and empathy.**

* Hannah Arendt: Human Condition

This type of freedom is fundamentally different, but not entirely incompatible with the idea of artistic freedom many of us (with a Western art school education) inherited. There are still a lot of things that an artist can use as material, but instead of focusing on why we "can't" use a certain piece of music, clothing or theory in our work, we should ask ourselves, why do we assume access to this thing in the first place? Similarly, we can choose not to work with explicitly political themes, but it does not change the fact that everything we put on the stage has a political dimension OR that being able to work without predetermined political labels (e.g. an artist vs. a female artist), is in itself hyperpolitical.

active-ism

The amount of choices one makes during a typical day in the studio must be in the thousands, if you count every dance move you make, every pronoun you utter or every lyric in every song you choose to play and so on. Most choices we make are not explicitly “made”, let alone discussed as a group. Instead, we arrive at them through an intuitive process, that is informed by our personal histories, zeitgeist, hopes, “discourse”, fears, bodies, knowledge, styles, political alignment, tastes, moods etc.

When a choice is presented as a choice, it creates friction in what many people see as the natural flow of work. Stopping the rehearsals to discuss whether a red baseball cap is primarily an eye-catching blob of colour, or a signifier of ‘Make America Great Again’, takes time, as well as rhetorical and emotional skills. It also requires a sense of safety about one's standing in the inevitable social hierarchy of the working group.

Sometimes, in order to avoid the existential dread that comes from making a choice, the whole thing is turned upside down into a question of “what does the piece need?” - as if the working group is there just to make sure that the work arrives at some predestined outcome. While I probably use the phrase all the time myself, a performance doesn't need anything! It's our own needs and desires that we are talking about.

Stopping the so-called natural flow of work allows us to see our actions as culturally conditioned rather than as laws of nature. Culture can be changed.

Stopping the flow often turns something that used to be a solution back into being a problem. This shows us how performance making is always a balancing act between:

the artistic (interested in questions and problems)

and

production (interested in answers and solutions).

(Traditionally, it has been the designer's job to come up with solutions rather than problems.)

In this book I want to explore contemporary stage design as an intrinsically problem-oriented practice, that includes, but is not defined by, its ability to come up with visual, auditive, spatial and temporal solutions.

**Being oriented
towards the problem
rather than the
solution, is one
possible definition of
artistic freedom.**

1.FOUR (acknowledgments)

"Attention involves a political economy, or an uneven distribution of attention time between those who arrive at the writing table, which affects what they can do once they arrive (and of course, many do not even make it). For some, having time for writing, which means time to face the objects upon which writing happens, becomes an orientation that is not available given the ongoing labor or other attachments, which literally pull you away. So whether we can sustain our orientation toward the writing table depends on other orientations, which affect what we can face at any given moment in time.*"

* Sara Ahmed: Queer Phenomenology

I have included this important quote from Sara Ahmed in order to remind the reader, as well as myself, of the fragility of the very condition of writing, thinking, and making art. This book is built upon concepts that were created by those who managed to arrive at the writing table, having experienced varying levels of hardship in doing so.

When one has kids or any 'other attachments', time (to write, to think) is not a thing that exists naturally, but something that needs to be created through the labour of others, as well as yourself. Similarly, conditions for problem-oriented work would not exist without the time and effort that my colleagues spend applying funding, organising and doing a shit-ton of other invisible admin work.

I want to thank my colleague, choreographer and Black feminist Sonya Lindfors for facilitating environments, where asking questions and educating oneself and others has always been an essential part of the work. This book would not exist without her devotion to developing and sharing decolonial and speculative stage practices.

Similarly I want to thank my colleague and life partner, choreographer Anna Maria Häkkinen for constant support, sensibility and knowledge, especially regarding (the history of) choreography. This book would be both unreadable and hollow without her insight, and lacking in perspective if it wasn't for our artistic work together.

Also, I want to thank the Arts Promotion Centre Finland for funding this orientation toward the writing table.

And last but not least, I want to thank all the other brilliant people that I've had a chance to work and think with: Jussi Matikainen, Aino Koski, Emmi Venna, Ima Iduozee and countless others. This book is the result of years of collective thinking. Thanks to Heidi Soidinsalo, Pilvi Porkola and Juuso Tervo for discussions along the writing process!

One more thing that I'd like to acknowledge, is that I was able to secure the funding for this book by identifying "a void" which only this book could "fill". While I have to have some faith in this individualistic and capitalist fantasy to continue with the work, I've become increasingly aware of the amount and depth of thinking that is happening in what I arrogantly thought of being the smallest and nichest of all voids.

In the Finnish context, some recent examples include Maija Hirvanen's and Eva Neklayeva's "Practical Performance Magic", which builds bridges between thinking and making in a way I thought was underexplored. Eetu Viren's "Vallankumouksen asennot", which was released already in 2021 but to which I stumbled upon only right before the publication of this book, deals with the embeddedness of the political in how we make and experience art. Had I read these books - and obviously countless others - beforehand, my understanding of the shape of this particular void would be vastly different.

1.5

When I'm not writing this book I take part in the making of dance and theatre performances. In the program notes, I am most often credited as a lighting designer, as that's the field in which I have formal education, some practical skills and possibly even an identifiable "practice" or "style". Sometimes I also make video design, scenography or music - or participate in the making of the work without a material medium of my own as a dramaturg of sorts.

While this book does not concentrate on any specific field of contemporary stage design, such as lighting, I thought it would make sense to give the reader a bit of context as to how the ideas presented in this book are rooted in my day-to-day practice as a lighting designer.

1) I often have a lot of time to just watch and think, especially during the part of the rehearsals that takes place in the studio, where opportunities to manipulate the lighting are few. While the performers might be busy performing, the choreographer might be busy making and communicating artistic decisions (and facilitating the whole situation), the sound designer might be already producing and playing material and the costume designer might be sourcing things from the outside world, I'm basically just sitting there, trying to make "sense" of it all. While I am part of the working group, I often do not work in a way that would contribute to the material reality of the situation. Instead, I work with concepts, ideas, structures and observations that lay the groundwork for lighting design, but which I also often share with the whole working group. This part of the work bears resemblance to the work of a dramaturg.

2) as I sit there and watch while the others produce material, I assume the role of the audience member. Even if I'm well aware that most of the material produced in the first few weeks hardly ever ends up in the final work, I'm already thinking about how it could become experienceable as a performance. For a lighting designer, it is a very practical question, as lighting is one of the main visual, rhythmical and affective tools for manipulating how we experience things. At the same time, how things become experienced expands easily into a highly abstract question that is not limited to a single field of study.

3) lighting is both a product and producer of the temporality and structure of the performance. Theatrical lighting is almost always constructed from somewhat static lighting states and the transitions between those states. Sometimes the lighting states correspond perfectly with how the work is, through a collective naming process, divided into different scenes or parts, but more often there are underlying ways of structuring the work that never become discussed through language. You could even say that lighting makes otherwise opaque structures and dramaturgy of the work if not visible, experienceable.

4) I have participated in many projects, in which the choreographer themselves is on the stage, sometimes as a part of a bigger group of performers and sometimes in solo works. This often means that they might need outside help to determine whether to enter the stage from left or right, or how long to wait before a lighting cue - or something much more complex. In this kind of situation, the composition of bodies in space and time is made accessible not only as choreography to the choreographer, but as some sort of expanded “stage work”. In my case, this has allowed me to work in a way in which I do not necessarily need a material (light etc.) entry point to be able to work with a the stage. Instead, the stage itself becomes the instrument - as well as the subject of this book.

chapter 2

ideas & ideologies

2.1 What is art?

Before starting to work with performances, I studied aesthetics at the university for two years. As one would expect, university aesthetics revolved around the questions of what is art, what is good art and what is beauty. At the time I was a bit bummed that the curriculum was so heavily focused on the study of ideas rather than applying those ideas towards actual artworks, so when the opportunity presented itself, I applied for an art school.

At the art school, I was equally surprised that the question of what is art didn't come up at all! (Maybe there was already a mutual understanding in place that I just wasn't aware of...) It seemed that in the actual art field, the quest to find a definition of art had all but dried out, or at least it had morphed into a debate of what art shouldn't be reduced to (art is not just a tool of well-being while also being beneficial to people, art is not just a part of the "creative economy" while also contributing to the economy and so forth.)

But anyway, how we define art, or choose not to define it, must also affect how we make art, right? From the top of my head, some possible historical definitions of art include:

- > ART IMITATES LIFE (mimesis)**
- > ART PRODUCES OBJECTS OF BEAUTY**
- > OBJECT BECOMES ART THROUGH ARTIST'S INTENTION AND MANIPULATION**
- > ART CONSTRUCTS (national, religious, class) IDENTITY**
- > ARTIST COMMUNICATES WITH ANOTHER PLANE OF EXISTENCE (has access to truth / beauty / genius)**
- > ART IS (self) EXPRESSION**
- > OBJECT BECOMES ART THROUGH THE INSTITUTIONAL BLESSING OF THE ARTWORLD**
- > ART IS AN OPEN CONCEPT**
- > ART CHALLENGES OUR WAY OF VIEWING THE WORLD**

These definitions, theories and ideas of art have obviously not been born only from within arts internal discourse, but they have evolved in parallel with larger technological, philosophical and political currents. As a result, how we define art in any given historical period, including our own, could be seen not only as a question of aesthetics, but as a clue as to how human life as a whole is organised.

The way we choose to define art is both a product and a producer of style and aesthetics in any given environment. If you believe (intellectually) that art is fundamentally about expression, you might (aesthetically) enjoy works that display expressive movement, expressive use of color or expressive brush strokes. If you believe (intellectually) that objects become art through institutional blessing, then you might (aesthetically) enjoy works that make this operation visible.

During the next 20 or so pages, we will spend some time with these historical definitions. The aim is not to make a comprehensive or airtight analysis of each one (to put it mildly), but to see if and how they reverberate in the way we make contemporary stages today.

Art imitates life

You could say that as a default, western dramatic theatre is based on the imitation of real world objects and events. A warm light from a low angle can be used to imitate the setting sun, or the sound of crickets can be used to tell the audience that “it is night”.

Sometimes the imitation is made intentionally transparent. The theatrical light source that creates the setting sun effect, might be visible to the audience, and the sound of crickets can jump-cut to silence.

The history and power of imitation is so strong that we have learned to ignore the wheels that were added to an otherwise “realistic” 18th-century bed, or the poorly disguised microphone on the actor’s cheek. This phenomenon is sometimes called suspension of disbelief.

In the contemporary stage, imitation has, to some extent, been replaced by what is often called representation. If we go back to the crickets:

We have probably heard the sound of crickets while wandering outside in the night. When we hear a successful imitation of that sound when sitting in the theatre, we might recall that experience and understand that the meaning 'night' is being communicated to us.

But what if the person sitting next to us has never been outside after dark? Won't they be able to decode this meaning?

It turns out they recognise the meaning 'night' just as well. They have learned the sound's ability to signify 'night' from movies and other theatre plays through repetition. For them, the sound of the crickets does not imitate the sound of real crickets in the nature, it's referent is the cultural convention itself.

If crickets went extinct today, their sound might still be able to signify 'night' for another hundred years, just like the picture of an enveloped letter represents the e-mail app on my phone*.

This could lead us to a conclusion that representation, rather than imitation, might be a more fruitful concept for studying the art of today. In the language of representation (or semiotics), the sound of crickets would have become a signifier for the signified 'night'.

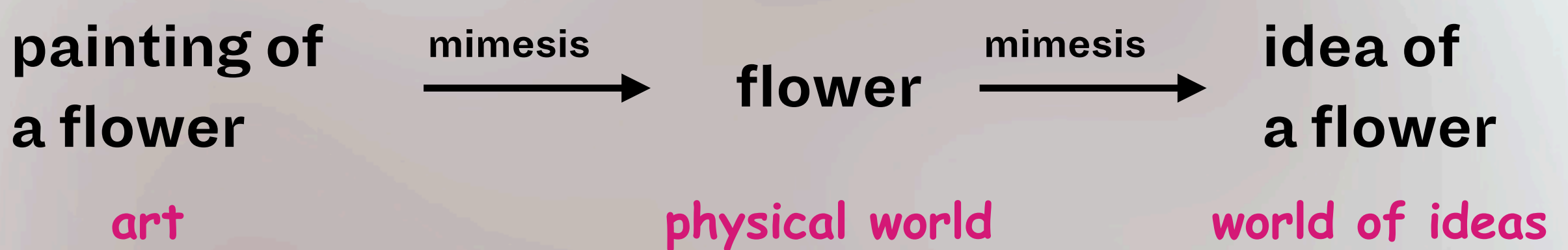
*** not really a quote but an idea from Jean Baudrillard's book Simulacra and Simulation**

[This doesn't mean that there is no place for imitation when talking about the "contemporary". The music or lights of a contemporary performance might be interpreted as an imitation of 'the nightclub' just as the dancer's pedestrian movement could be read as imitation of 'not dancing'. The contemporary imitation can be also thought of as imitation of non-existing objects - creation and imagining of worlds that do not (yet) exist.]

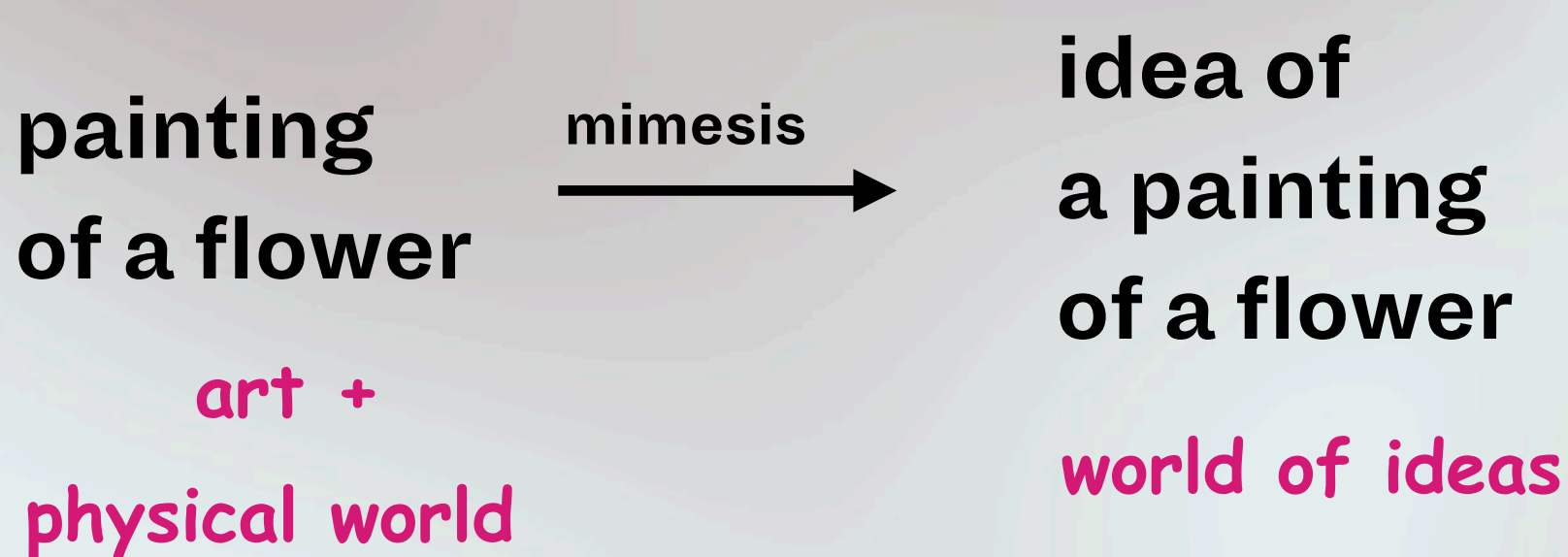


artist communicates with another plane of existence

Art was, for Plato, imitation - but so was the so-called reality in which we live. Because art imitated objects of the world which was itself an imitation, art should in fact be considered an imitation that is two steps removed from what he considered "the real world of ideas".



But what if art objects are not only imitations of other objects, but they are also objects in their own right? According to this logic, the art object would then be a reflection of its own transcendental idea.



When we talk about paintings, there is no need to make this distinction, because the original, physical painting coincides with its own idea. There is no ideal, 100% version of Matisse's 'Dance' that wouldn't be the 'Dance' itself

Performances, on the other hand, are always just versions or reproductions of themselves. While a printed book containing Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time* could be seen as a reproduction of the original manuscript of '*Swing Time*', performances don't really have an original that they would be reproductions of. The premiere, which would be the most logical option, is hardly ever the best or most accurate execution of the work. If we're lucky enough to perform our work multiple times, we might end up having a favourite instance of the show that went "perfectly", but the only way that we could judge it as perfect, is that we're actually measuring it against an imaginary, idealised version.

Performances tend to be events that only exist for a limited amount of time, just like weddings or football matches. Still we tend to talk about them not as past events, but as if they continue to exist in the present, in the same ontological category of 'art objects' as paintings.

One could just as reasonably say that:

"Florentina Holzinger's 'Tanz' was a great performance"

or that

"Florentina Holzinger's 'Tanz' is a great performance".

I would understand the latter as a statement of the performance as an art object (that has the theoretical potential to always become experienceable again) and the former as a statement about a single experience of the work as a past event. The statement: "Julia and Janet's wedding is beautiful" wouldn't make any sense a week after it happened.

The art market deals with objects that have clearly defined borders, such as paintings, novels and performances. Once a painting is presented to the public or a novel is published, we can be quite sure that the work has reached its final form and stopped developing - at least from within.

Performances never stop developing. In between the actual performances, a dance piece or a theatre play exists in notebooks, storages, hard drives and muscle memory. When a performance is brought back to life, it will never be exactly what it used to be. Performers get older and their bodies absorb movement parasites, as my colleague Emmi Venna might put it, from other works in which they perform. Conventional lights get changed to leds and the sound is run from a newer and newer version of Ableton Live.

The tools and means with which the performance is brought into being are in a constant state of change. As a result, the performances themselves change, but the idea or identity "behind" the performance as an art object remains unchanged.

While it would be somewhat silly, in the year 2024, to base one's idea of performances on platonic idealism, it seems that performances do "exist" on two somewhat separate ontological planes. The identity, idea or artobjecthood of a dance piece or theatre play is never completely revealed and exhausted in a single performance, not because there is a mystical essence that can never truly be grasped, but because art objects are complex. All the ideas, desires and potential relations between its chosen materials can never unfold in a way that would turn a single performance into the final, ultimate, 100% version of the work.

The fact that a performance can never fully reach its potential, not in terms of goodness but in terms of becoming itself, shouldn't be thought of as a weakness. The fact that (good) performances don't get emptied out through repetition should be seen as proof of their life force.

(A somewhat mystical pursuit of a 100% experience of a work, which I know will never arrive, is one of the main reasons why I still believe in touring.)

Art constructs identity (Design constructs identity)

A relationship between the work and the audience starts to form already before the performance starts. First, the visual language of the performance will be partly established to the viewer either by pictures of the performance itself or other promotional photos, posters, graphic design and typography that are usually carefully chosen to both sell the performance and to visually contain and develop its ethos. It is not only the type of visuality, but also the media in which the performance is being marketed, that already suggest who the performance is for: a paper newspaper ad assumes a different audience than an Instagram post. The overall visual culture of the venue also affects the how we orientate towards the performance - it is very different to experience a performance as framed by the “tentacular underground-chic” pictorial code of Beursschouwburg or Baltic Circle*, than the “adult-neutral” feel of a major dance house, such as the one here in Helsinki.

* venues and festivals in Brussels and Helsinki

**Then the audience enters
the auditorium and they
form relations with the
stage and with one
another.**



**Are we actively sharing
and negotiating the
space..**

**..or are we invited to participate
in the performance in a more
conventional way as
spectators?**

During the performance, the audience is presented with subtle and less subtle signals that will either invite them in or shut them out. A signal could be a type of sneaker, a reference to a meme, a philosophical concept presented in the program note, a song, a choice of words, or the opening of a curtain. The power of signals is based on their recognisability. The feeling of recognition, be it a song that you know, or a familiar piece of costume fabric, might be an important signal saying to an audience member: " you are expected and wanted".

What is a problem, is when recognisability is achieved by "masking the smallest common denominator as a sophisticated inside joke*". In a performance that is aimed at the larger public, the smallest common denominator is sometimes found from things like vaguely recognisable but violently outdated gender roles. This will inevitably leave out audience members, who do not recognise themselves within this structuring of gender.

In a contemporary art setting (where many people in the audience might be artists themselves), the smallest common denominator is often found from the art field itself. This will inevitably leave out the parts of the audience who haven't been exposed to these references.

***a phrase that was originally presented as a question in Jaakko Pallasvuo's 2011 video work How To Internet**

Art produces objects of beauty

Beauty is a word that is used sparsely in contemporary art-making settings. Either this is because something else has replaced beauty as the main aesthetic category that art is striving for, or because art as a whole operates increasingly outside the aesthetic.

While the latter doesn't feel right, let's entertain the idea for a second.

Aesthetic pleasure might assume a sincere, direct relationship between the object and its audience that is fundamentally impossible to achieve in the contemporary stage, which is built for creating layered and ironic* experiences. The idea that art would even produce something that can be known in advance, unless it's "new ways of thinking" or some form of moral "goodness", feels antithetical to contemporary art, which deals with ambiguity and speculation rather than fixed outcomes. When working with contemporary stage, the production of aesthetics or aesthetic pleasure tends to be disguised as something else, as if the aesthetic was only valuable if it's used to promote an agenda of a higher order (political, philosophical, conceptual etc).

*** in a sense that contemporary dance artist knows that they cannot just dance, and the audience knows that the artist cannot just dance, and the artist knows that the audience knows, and the audience knows that the artist knows that the audience knows. In the end they'll find a way to dance and everyone's happy, or perhaps not happy but at least this loop has reached some kind of temporary conclusion.**

It could also be that the aesthetic can be increasingly found from the outskirts of the art object rather than in the object itself. The aesthetic is distributed all over the life of the artist, the political gestures the artist makes and the poem-like texts that no longer only describe the artwork, but almost rival it in lushness. If the artist spends 60% of their time writing grant applications and 40% in the studio, it's no wonder that the production of text would suck up some of that aesthetic juice that would (I guess, ideally) flow into the production of actual artworks.

When you see a show now, most often it's not by any means non-aesthetic or anti-aesthetic. If we believe that art is still fundamentally about aesthetics, and beauty has just been replaced as the main aesthetic quality that art is striving for, we can go into two different directions. We can either think that beauty has been replaced by an endless array of aesthetic qualities, beginning from the inclusion of 'the sublime' into the discussion in the 18th century, and building up from there to include 'picturesque', 'grotesque', 'trashy' and endless amount of other named and unnamed qualities.

We can also, just as a thought experiment, entertain the idea that all contemporary objects would have a common aesthetic property or affect, akin to beauty, in which their being as art objects would be grounded. Even if it wouldn't be intellectually superior, it might be comforting to believe that all (good) art objects have some inward thingness that exudes a mystical, auratic or poetic glow. Unless someone comes up with a better suggestion, I'm just gonna call that beauty.

art is (*self*) expression

I have personally always felt queasy about referring to my work or any parts of it as expression. If you want to express yourself, you need to believe that there is a self to be expressed and a need for that expression to be made - neither of which I, as a middle aged white dude, do. Maybe this is indeed just a fatigue of a white male artist whose white male peers have dominated the space of expression, and other groups have still much left to be expressed.

Anyway, the word “expressive” often implies a very strong, visceral materiality, like a brush stroke so strong that it makes the act of painting itself very visible. It also implies that an emotion or inner state precedes the act: there is already a something, that the expression just turns into a visible, audible or otherwise experienceable form.

The way I see it, this risks emphasising the intention, narrative or emotional state “behind” an action at the cost of us paying attention to the action itself. Only half-jokingly, the failure to collectively move beyond expression is the main reason many people say they don’t “get” contemporary dance, which as I understand it, requires embracing the action over its cause, motive, or emotion "behind" it.

object becomes art through the institutional blessing of the artworld

In the 1960's, the American writer Arthur Danto introduced the institutional art theory. This theory suggests that a work is granted the status of art through the institutional blessing of the artworld, which consists of institutions, critics, colleagues and to a certain degree, the audience.

The obvious flaw of this argument is that it is very circular - everything presented inside the physical space or within the institutional context of the art institution becomes art. The power of art institution to grant this blessing, on the other hand, depends on the fact that it contains works of art.

All institutional blessings are not the same: you could argue that an object only becomes contemporary art when presented in a contemporary art institution and so forth.

Even with its flaws the institutional art theory looms large over this book.

Often the physical site of the performance itself, like a theatre or a museum, does much of the heavy lifting of “separating us from our everyday geographies”*. The institutionally separation of art from non-art coincides with the physical: inside these walls there is art, outside these walls there is non-art.

The institution, be it a performance venue, museum, arts council or a festival, can also grant its blessing for objects and events that are located outside their walls, like on the street, in the forest, or online.

The more established the artist, the less they depend from the institutional blessing. Established artists often have a literal background institution of their own, but even without one, their artistry becomes institutionalised in itself, often after having been approved by enough gatekeepers.**

A conceptual artist could wield this institutional power and simply declare something to be art, like the Finnish performance collective Reality Research Center did when they invited the audience to consider the populist politician Timo Soini as a performance in their 2011 work Timo Soini: Taideteos (Timo Soini: Artwork).

***Rachel Hann: Beyond empty stages**

**** I mean theoretically, to be recognised as art, not in terms of resources**

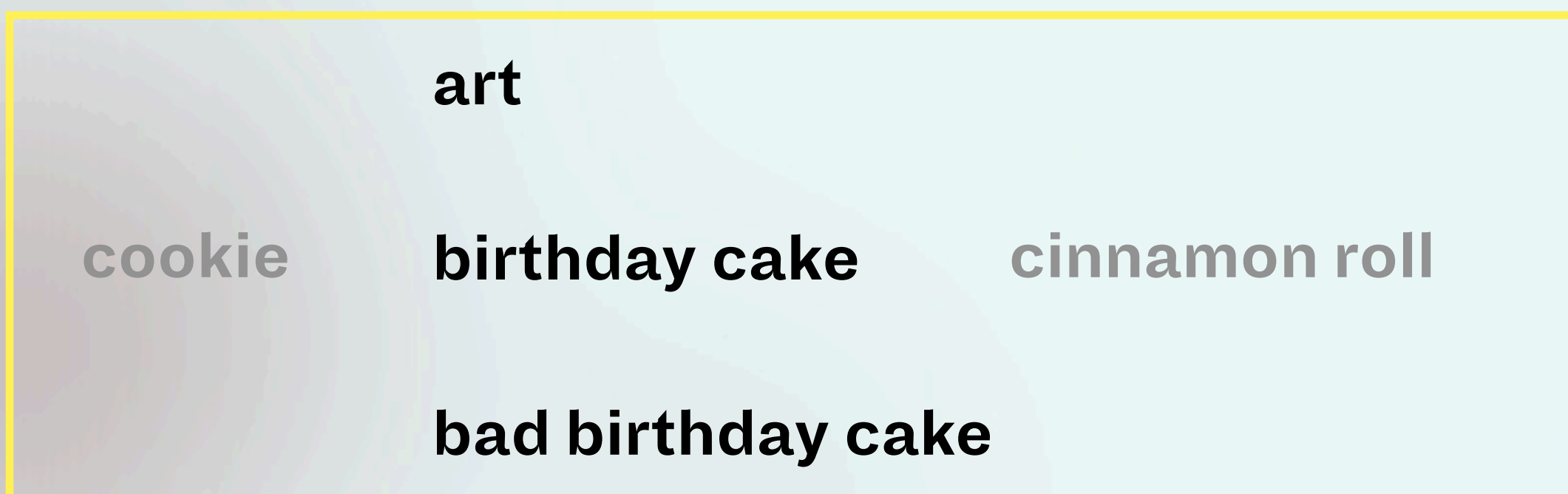
Stage design is also a factor in how a performance gains institutional weight. Even the act of hiring a designer provides the work with institutional credibility, as the designers carry with themselves the institutional blessings they've gained in their previous work, like a suitcase with stickers from places visited.

Design can operate “institutionally” in multiple ways, such as using something that already has the status of art to elevate another object into art. We will dig deeper into this in 3.7 - contemporary loops.

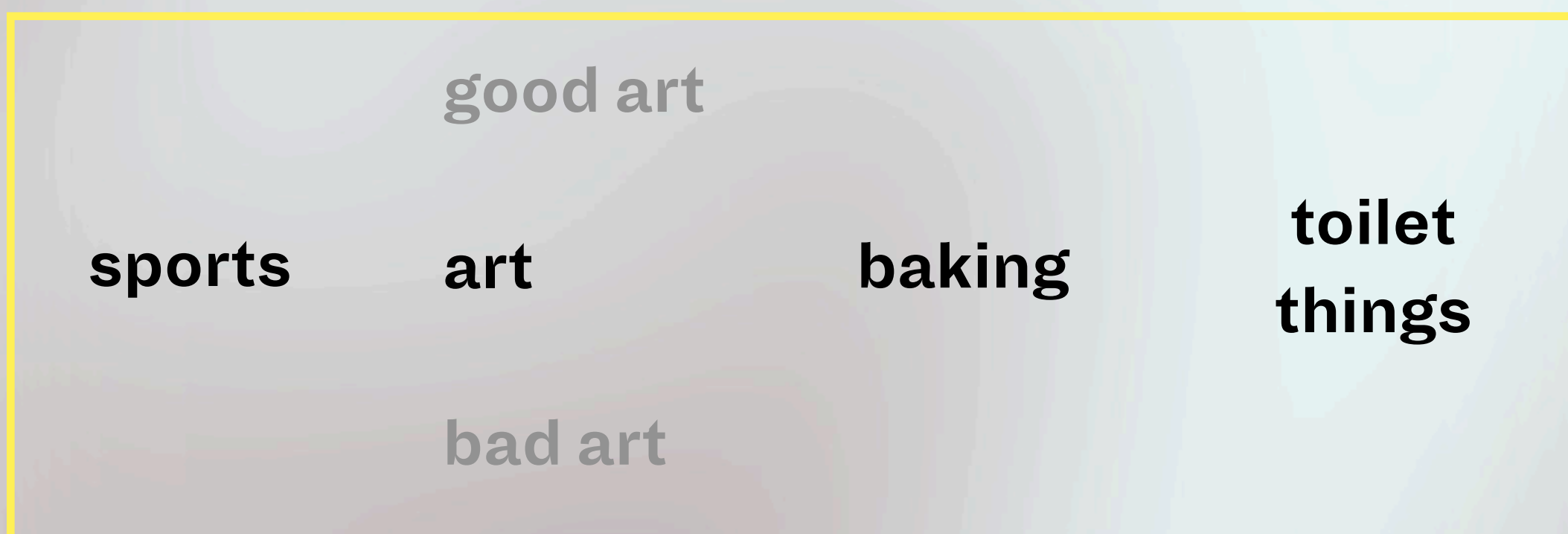
art as a metaphor or as a praise

In everyday language, an object can be granted the status of art through its sheer quality. A beautiful birthday cake could be praised as a piece of art because making it required extraordinary skill and / or creativity. This type of use might feel somewhat far removed from how we understand (western, professional, contemporary) art today, but it is useful to remember that the division between art and other crafts is fairly recent.

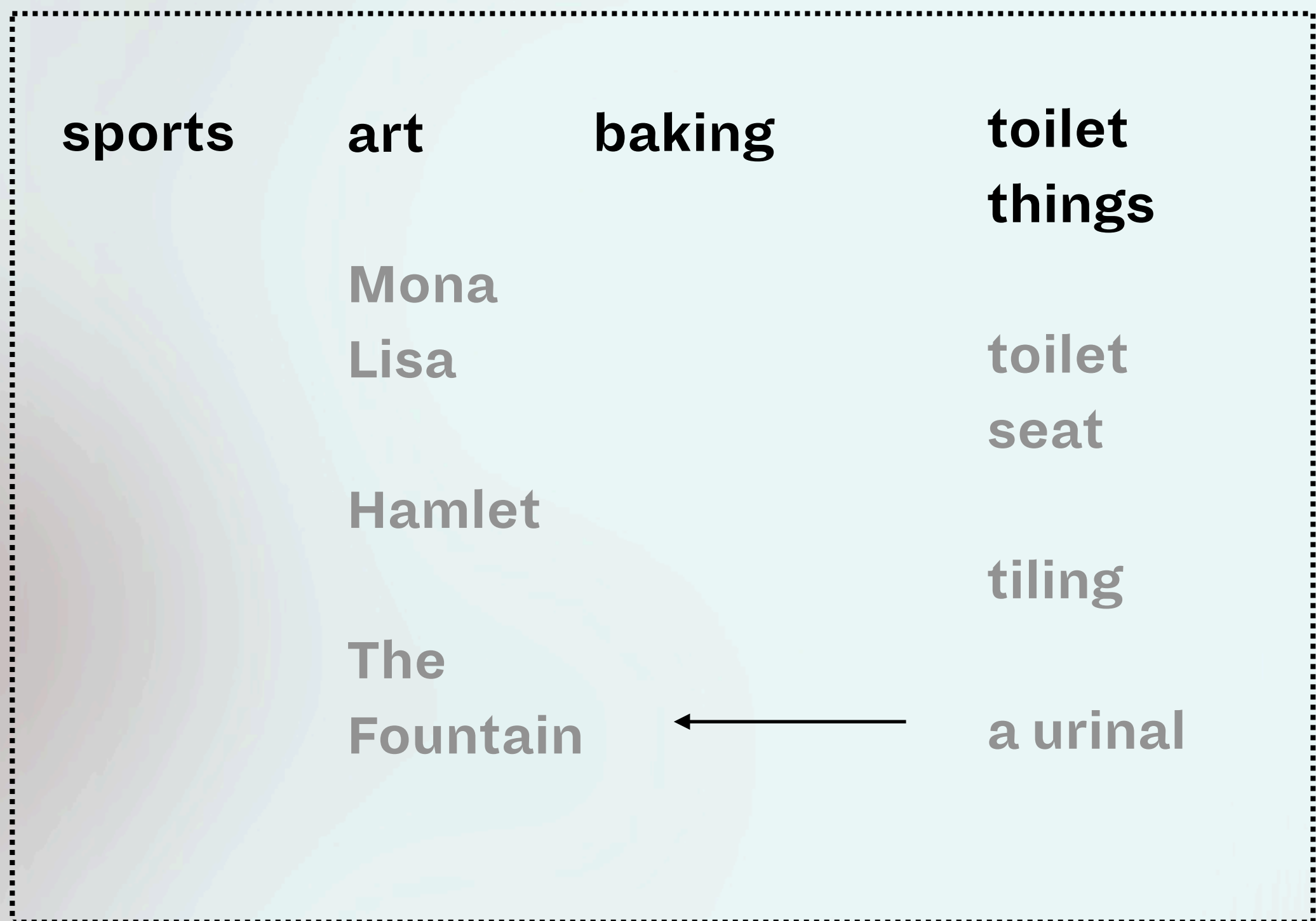
Anyway, when the word 'art' is used this way, it is placed into a "vertical" category.



This is quite different from a horizontal categorisation, where art is understood as art, whether its good or bad, just as long as it fills some other criteria:



When we praise a birthday cake as art, we are probably trying to say that we appreciate its beauty or originality in a same way that we would appreciate those qualities in a work of art. Nevertheless, it would be very difficult for even the worlds most talented baker to have their work enter the “horizontal” category of art without some conceptual maneuvering. What I mean by that, is that objects do not become art because of what they are as objects, but because they become readable as art through a series of processes, some of which we are trying to outline in this book. Again, we can look into the institutional art theory as a way of emphasizing the environment in which an object is presented over the object itself.



Let's think about the the most well-known piece of ready-made art, the Fountain. Nobody really ever talks about the industrial designer who used their creativity to design the physical urinal, let alone the factory worker using their skill to manufacture it. Marcel Duchamp, the person that we decide to call the artist, is two steps removed from the physical object's coming into being. What Duchamp is making is a "horizontal" move, where the urinal changes category from toilet equipment to art, and becomes the Fountain. Let's call this move a conceptual act.

When we see a urinal in a museum, it forces us to think of “artobjecthood” itself. Not only as the property of an object, but as the relationality between the object and its environment, the museum, which also represents the institutional art world as a whole. The fact that a urinal can become an artwork suggests not only that the boundaries of art as a “horizontal” category are porous and unstable, but that its future life force might be found near or just outside those boundaries.

As argued before, a beautiful birthday cake can be praised as art in its “vertical” meaning for its skillfulness and originality, but it would require some other type of maneuvering to include that cake in the “horizontal” category of art as an institutionally governed, professional practice.

When making a new performance, we actually use a lot of “vertical” skills with which our chosen material such as text, wood, bodies, paint or flour is organised. We use our creativity and imagination for crafting beautiful and original objects, dance moves, scenes and worlds. We do a lot of things in bringing the object to life that Duchamp didn’t bother to do. But without the ability to move horizontally, what we do is doomed to look, in the eyes of the contemporary stage, like a beautiful birthday cake.

The “horizontal” skills, with which all this creativity is made recognisable as a professional art practice, are much harder to learn, or even recognise as skills. (Perhaps the whole purpose of this book is to draw our attention to this horizontality.)

a baker

skill

creativity

craftpersonship

materiality

focus on the object

moves “vertically”

Duchamp

cultural capital

strategy

institutional approval

conceptualisation

focus on the act or idea

moves “horizontally”

object becomes art through manipulation and intention

One common idea of art, especially in everyday use, is that an object becomes art through the active manipulation of the maker. This can be seen in the marketing of Instagram filters, that encourage the maker to turn their photography into art by using different filters or effects. When publishing these manipulated images, the possibly very talented but not institutionally recognised photographers often accompany them with hashtags such as #art and #artphotography, in the hopes that their explicitly stated intention to make art would become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As a technique, this might not work in a contemporary context, which typically values coolly detached artistry over those who seem too hungry, eager and desperate.

Either way, this “theory” might be interesting in other ways.

Why is the use of a black & white filter a thinkable way of transforming a "regular", non-art picture into an artwork? Maybe black & whiteness is associated with style, prestige and “high culture”, because it denounces the kitschy, bodily, commercial seduction of colors? Maybe the tradition of black&white art photography is so strong, that one might just try to slip their own work in the stream of institutionally recognised pictures and hope that nobody can tell the difference.

Or maybe the explicit manipulation of reality (removing the colors) forces the viewer to look at the picture as a picture rather than its content. This could happen on two levels:

1 The black & whiteness moves the emphasis from the content into the form. The aesthetic and material qualities of the picture, such as light, shadow, texture and composition take precedence over what it represents. This action could be loosely described as modern.

2 The black & whiteness moves the emphasis from the content and form into the act of seeing itself. The manipulation makes the picture visible in its own "pictureness". This action could be loosely described as post-modern.

Contemporary stages rarely utilise black & white filters, although I did once try to achieve that effect by using a physical lighting filter that makes everything appear either black or orange. Anyway, the reason I'm talking about this is that the contemporary stage relies on similar strategies of unnaturalising its subject, that might draw our attention either into the material qualities of a gesture or the very act of making that gesture itself.

A common method of unnaturalising is repetition. If a performer would scream on stage, we would probably try to read it first in causal and psychological terms: what happened, what are they feeling? If they would repeat the exact same scream, we would enter a state of doubt: did the same thing that happened to them happen again, or is there something else in play? If the scream would be repeated a third or fourth time, we would probably start to look for a rhythmical pattern that might offer an explanation or context for the screaming. After 10 screams, we might be drawn to the quality of the scream: the pressure of the sound, the shape of the mouth when it produces the sound, how it resonates, first in the chest and the skull of the performer, then in the space. Does it get muffled in the curtains of the theatre or brighter and harsher when echoed by the bare brick walls of what used to be a factory? Finally, we will notice how the sound resonates in our own eardrums, sternum or the surface of our skin.

After 15 or 20 screams, we would have probably explored much of what there is to be explored in terms of both the meaning and the quality of the sound. The repetition has exhausted the act of screaming from its quality and meaning, and what we're left with is the act of repetition itself.

the act of repetition itself.

the act of repetition itself.

the act of repetition itself.

the act of repetition itself.

the act of repetition itself.

the act of repetition itself.

repetition is often distributed in time, but it can also be distributed in space like this:

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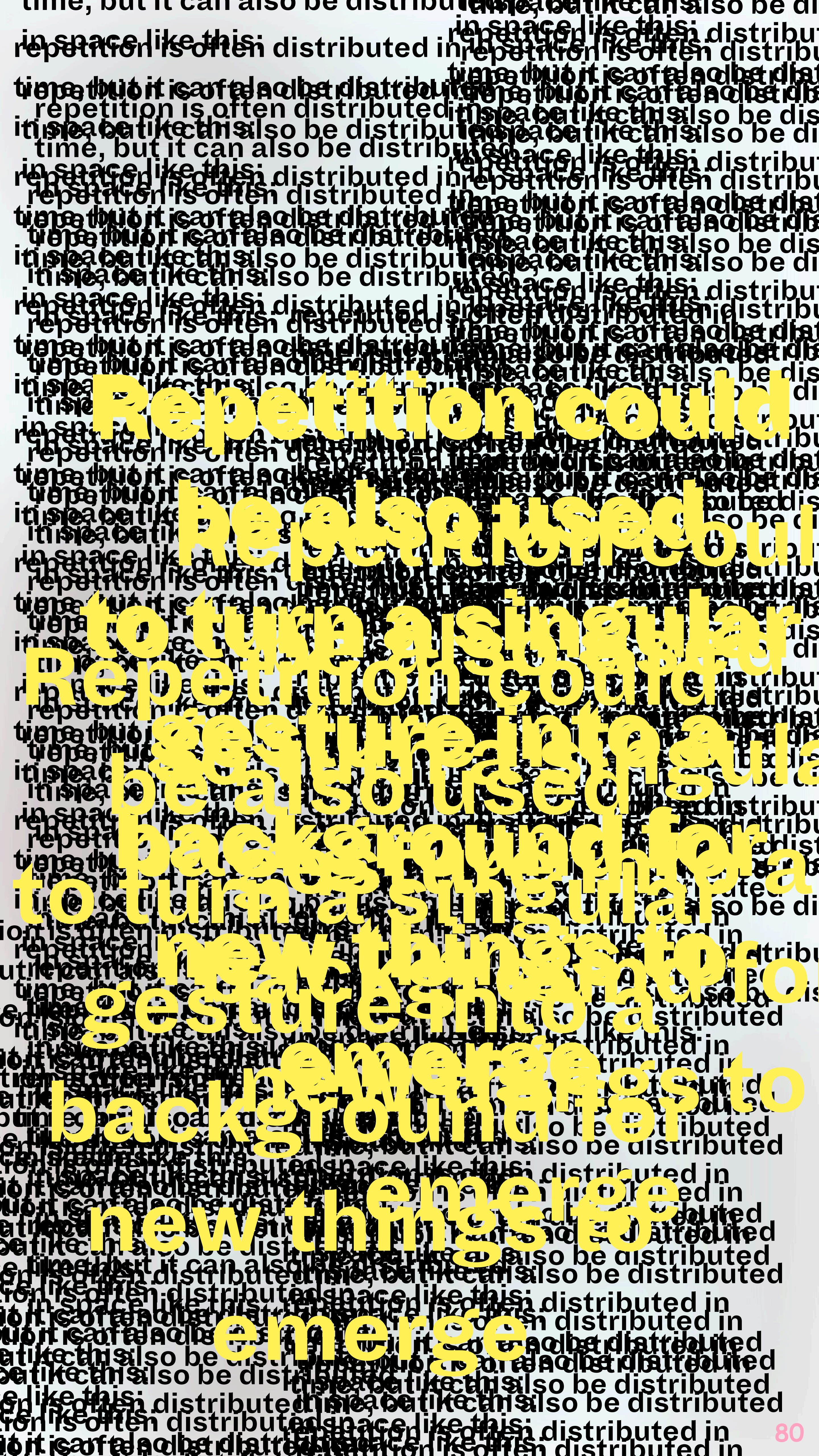
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Repetition could

be also used

to turn a singular
Repetition could

gesture into a
be also used

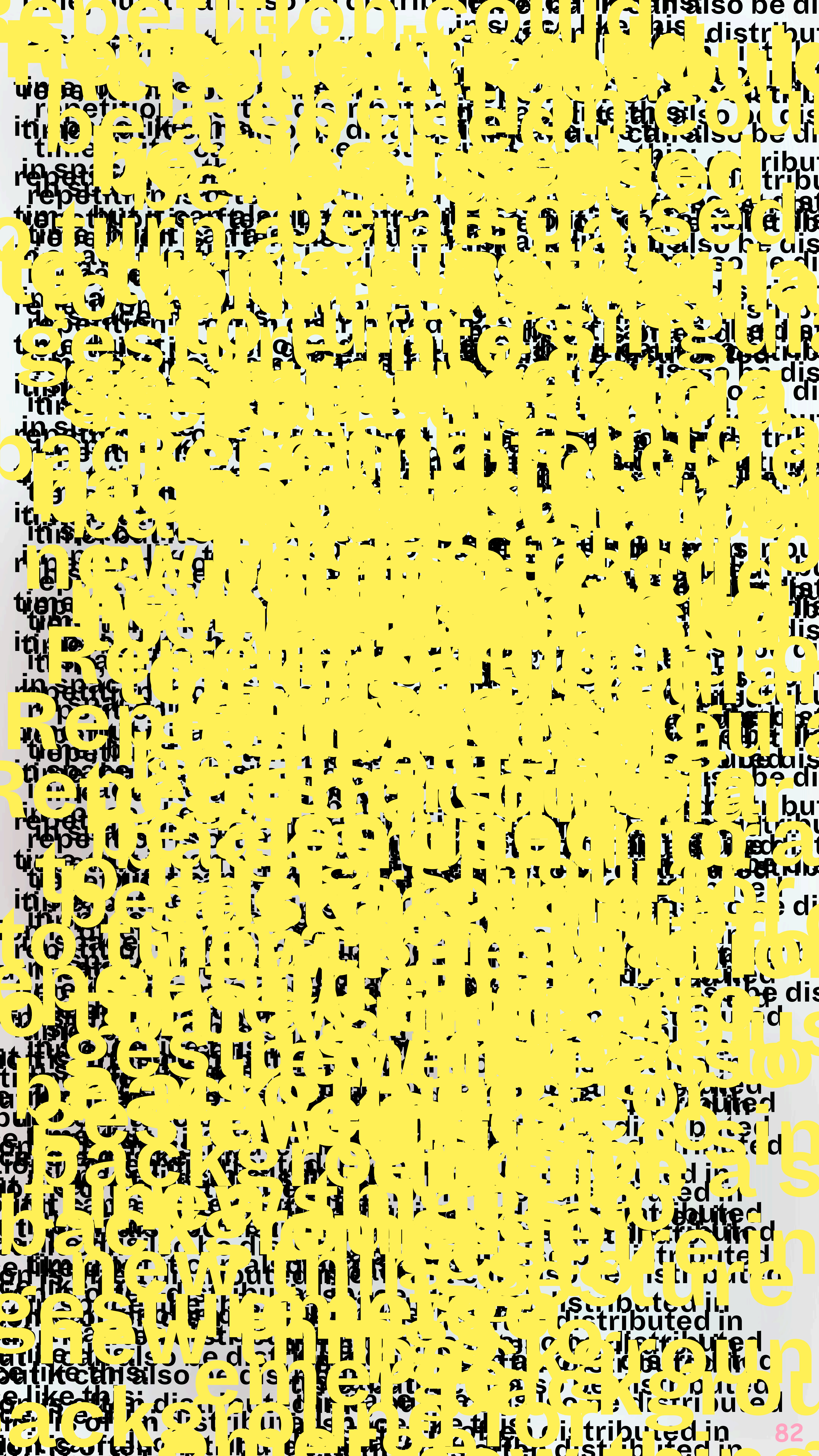
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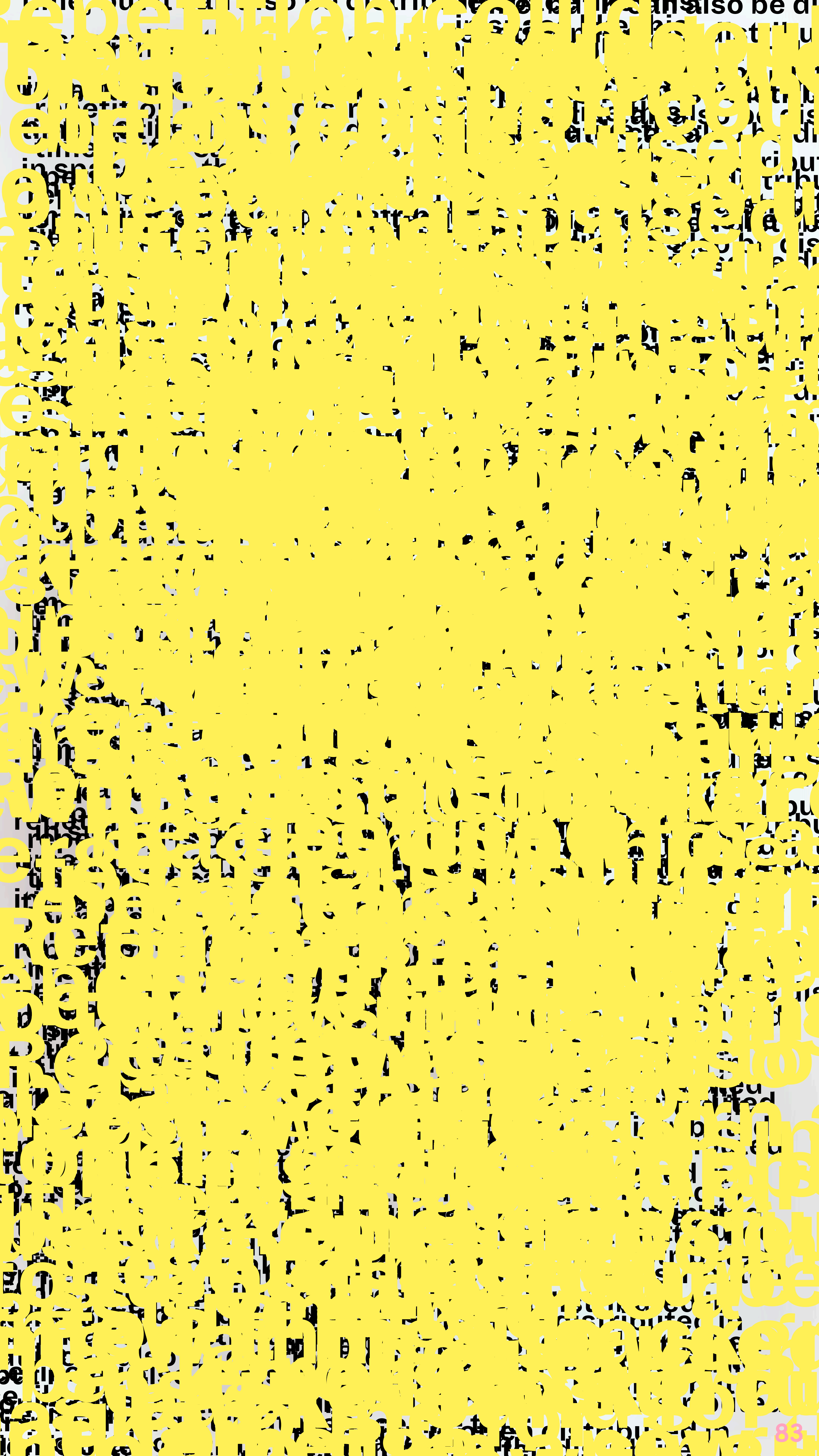
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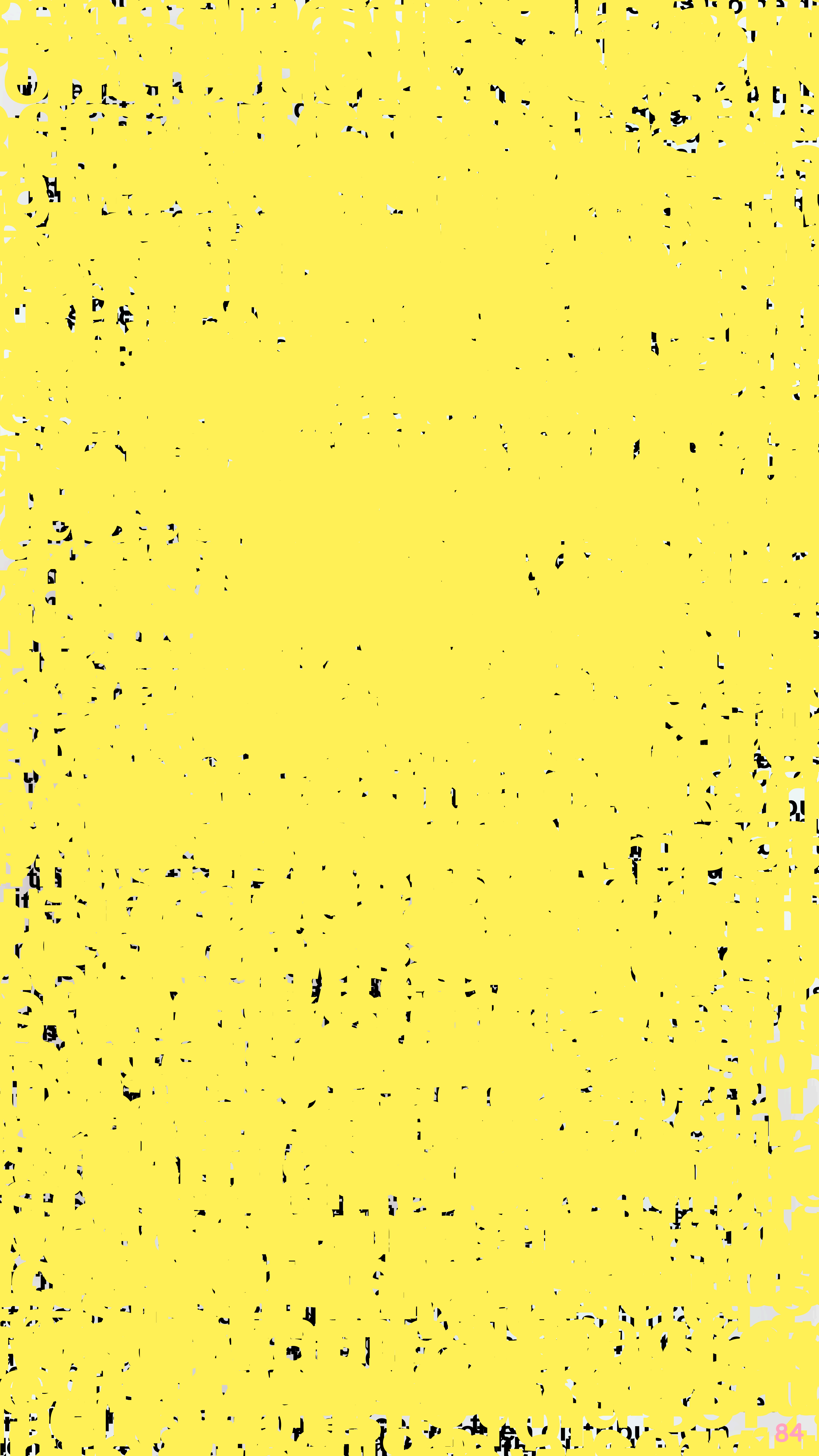
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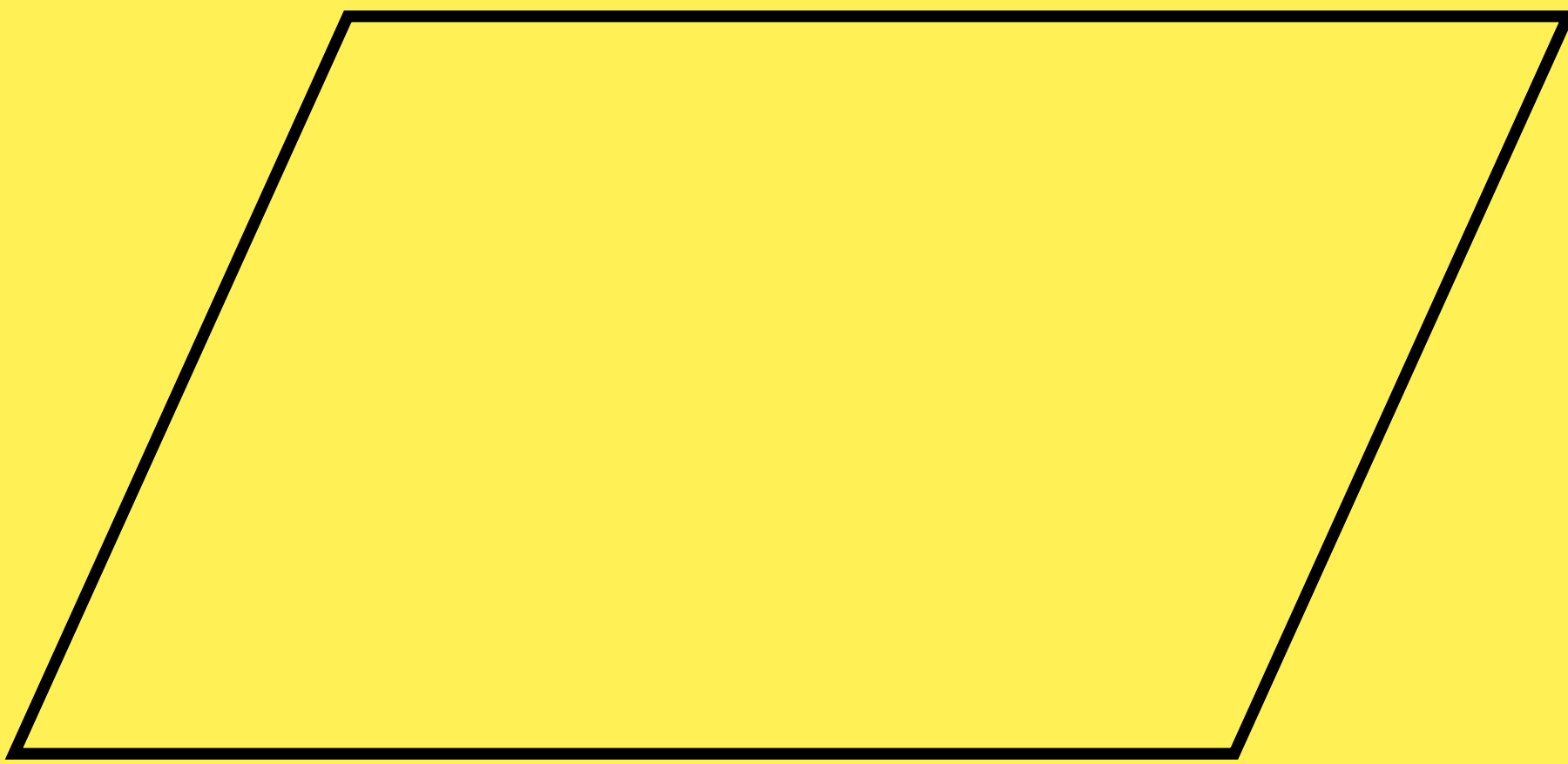




art is an open concept

We can also think of art as an open field of inquiry that can mean very different things to different people.

This means that art as a category would only exist as a relation between all other possible categories, which in turns leads easily to art being defined through what it is not.



The usefulness of any word is determined just as much by the meanings it includes (cat = cat) as the ones it excludes (cat ≠ dog). As an open concept, art is defined as ≠ culture, ≠ entertainment, ≠ wellbeing, ≠ utility objects, ≠ theory etc.

The appealing thing about this definition is obviously its openness. But if art is seen as a category, whose only distinct quality is its ability to produce objects with indeterminate outcomes, it is very exposed to the will of those who cannot handle indeterminate outcomes such as right-wing politicians.

All the previously outlined historical theories and definitions of art inform, regardless of whether I choose to believe in them or not, the way I create and experience performances today.

In order to go further, I've made a kind of bullet point "my art philosophy" which will be effectual until the end of this book. The bullet points don't necessarily answer the question "what is art?", but rather "what should I take into account when I make or experience art?"

MANY SEEMINGLY OUTDATED DEFINITIONS OF ART AFFECT HOW WE MAKE ART TODAY

THERE CAN BE EXPRESSION IN ART, BUT EXPRESSION ALSO PRESUMES AN INNER SOMETHING THAT NEEDS TO BE EXPRESSED

ART CONSTRUCTS IDENTITIES, AND GATHERINGS AROUND ART ARE PLACES WHERE THESE IDENTITIES ARE NEGOTIATED

INSTITUTIONS PLAY A ROLE IN HOW AN OBJECT BECOMES ART

MAKING ART REQUIRES SOME FORM OF SKILL. SOME SKILLS ARE APPLIED DIRECTLY TOWARDS THE OBJECT, SOME ARE USED TO MOVE IT BETWEEN CONTEXTS

ART IS SOMEHOW STILL ABOUT IMITATION. WHAT IS WORTH IMITATING?

ART PRODUCES BEAUTY (OR SOME OTHER AESTHETIC QUALITY)

IF A WORK OF ART IS BAD, IT DOES NOT NECESSARILY MAKE IT NON-ART

IF WORK OF ART DOES NOT DEMONSTRATE ANY SITUATEDNESS IN ITS OWN CANON, IT MIGHT NOT BE CONTEMPORARY ART

ART IS ALWAYS POLITICAL

NON-POLITICAL ART IS HYPERPOLITICAL

EACH WORK OF CONTEMPORARY ART EXPLORES, OR IS EXPECTED TO EXPLORE, THE BOUNDARIES OF WHAT ART CAN BE

THE INVENTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY COULD HAVE MADE PAINTING OBSOLETE BUT PEOPLE ARE STILL PAINTING. SOMETHING SIMILAR PROBABLY HAPPENED IN YOUR PRACTICE

THE GRAND NARRATIVE OF TODAY IS THAT WE ARE LIVING IN THE AGE AFTER THE GRAND NARRATIVES

ARTIST'S INTENTION IS NOT ENOUGH TO TURN AN OBJECT INTO ART

ARTIST'S MANIPULATION OF REALITY IS NOT ENOUGH TO TURN AN OBJECT INTO ART, BUT MANY CONTEMPORARY ARTWORKS ARE BORN FROM MAKING THE ACT OF MANIPULATION VISIBLE

2.2 stage and contemporaneity

The history of art, as well as any history, is often understood in terms of -isms, which correspond relatively neatly with different historical periods; 19th century with romanticism, first part of 20th century with modernism and the latter part with post-modernism etc. While new forms of art, such as the ready-made, might have required completely new ways of understanding what art is to be included in the conversation in the first place, it doesn't necessarily mean that the previously dominant ideas just disappeared. Instead, our understanding of art looks probably more like an unwashed tablecloth, with faded stains from past ideologies buried under more recent, still vividly colored spills. Once an object is granted entry into the world of art in any given era, under the particular rules of that era, it tends to stay there* even if the dominant definition of art keeps mutating. To allow this to happen, we use prefixes such as 'modern' or 'contemporary' to distinguish art that operates within the current criteria from art that doesn't.

*if lucky enough to survive both physically and institutionally

Things are usually named and defined only after they have become big, visible and slow enough to pin down. The era and aesthetic with which this book is concerned, contemporaneity, is understood paradoxically both as "the time in which we are" and "the time that is already distant enough for us to perceive its outlines". Contemporary, as a word, only suggests "neutral" coexistence in time, but as a successive term for the modern and the post-modern art movements, it's obviously also a signifier of a certain aesthetic, ideology and a period of time, which will sooner or later, at least partly, give way to another.

So what is this era in which we exist or which we are about to exit? To find out, we have to take two steps back.

Modernism was, in Jürgen Habermas's words, movement towards movement. Modernism would free the artist from the constraints of perspective and representation, just like it would unleash the flow of ideas, money, technology and commodities. Progress was meant to be fast and linear like train.

Post-modernism was perhaps also about movement, but the train tracks would be so interconnected and well oiled, that the connections between objects and meanings would become unpredictable and slippery. Although often attributed to the last few decades of the 20th century, we might have been living peak post-modernism the past couple of years, with things like Donald Trump, memes and AI embodying post modern ideas with unprecedented accuracy.

Contemporary builds on that interconnectedness, but this time alternating between slipperiness and friction. The contemporary is characterised with a fantasy of stopping or exhausting the movement, while desperately looking for new ways to continue the ride. The contemporary is, as my colleague Sonya Lindfors would say, like bad dating, in that the contemporary is often sending mixed, contradictory signals. It wants to have nice things, but also appear free from desire. It wants to have expression, desire and style, but it needs to present them as thoughtful (political) gestures.

Again, this doesn't mean that all contemporary art is cynical, insincere or bad! What I'm trying to say is that to operate within the contemporary, one needs to understand, or at least, navigate its unspoken rules*. The contemporary is not devoid of life, creativity, beauty or expression, it's just that those things are approached indirectly, with doubt.

*Perhaps this is not any more complex than navigating the rules of the oil painting or the fuga in their given era and "scene"

dominant but dead*

While the contemporary, as an overarching ideology of art making, can and should be criticised, its evolution hasn't reached an endpoint. The contemporary can be shaped, and it has been shaped, by many positive developments, including the rise of feminist, decolonial and ecological practices. This is important, because even during this seemingly "contemporary" era, artforms that have already mostly ceased developing, like modernist art, and possibly even "romantic" or "classical" art, are still being made and more significantly, funded.

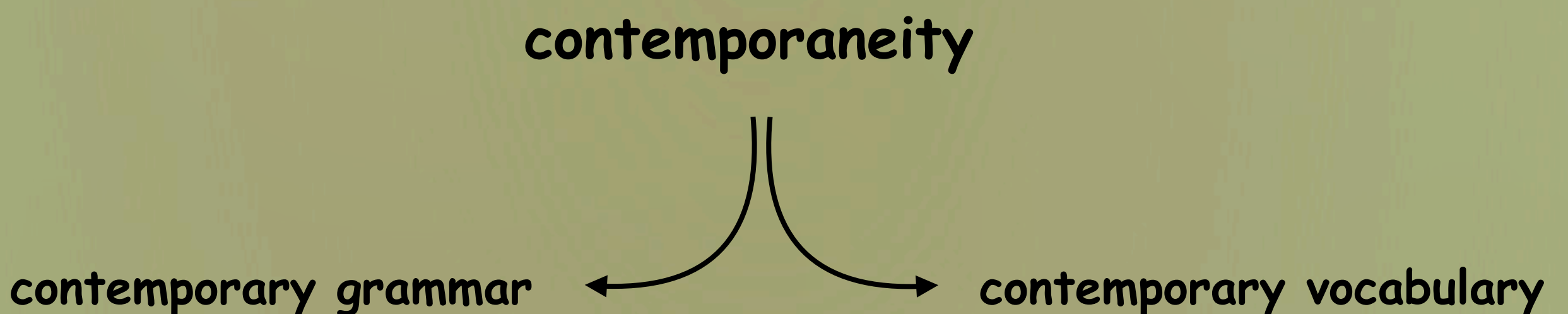
Why the funding bodies would support art that is historical at best and obsolete at worst (or outright violent at the very worst) is anybody's guess. It might have something to do with how much of art keeps its efforts to contemporarise itself at the surface level (at the level of themes, visuality and topics) rather than letting the urgent contemporary questions permeate the art making process itself.

* Habermas: *Modernity - an incomplete project*.
Published in *Postmodern culture* (edit. Hal Foster)
in the essay he is talking specifically about modernism

What seems to be culturally relevant, trendy or dominant in terms of life force is often not where the majority of power and resources are; the same 60.000 euros that funds an imaginary post-ecological symposium for two years wouldn't be enough to keep an imaginary Nordic Opera house running for a single day. The contemporary artists are made to compete against each other in an opaque and arbitrary "meritocracy" while the majority of resources remain firmly out of reach. Not only out of reach of the artist, but relatively untouched by the reformative demands of contemporaneity as a cultural force.

two contemporaneities

The contemporaneity of art gets often mixed with the contemporaneity of its subject matter. In my opinion, Lady Macbeth taking a selfie does not a contemporary performance make. Instead we should think of such acts as translations of sorts, where a pre-existing meaning is just coded into a contemporary "vocabulary". While this might sound like I'm on a mystical quest for a "real contemporaneity", which I kind of am, contemporaneity is something that has to pierce the work, affecting not only the words but the grammar, syntax or the whole semantic structure of the work. This is not to discount the importance of subject matters, themes and topics, just saying that they operate outside this particular idea of contemporaneity.



We will go deeper into the temporality-part of contemporaneity, and how it manifests differently in theatre and choreography in part 4.4



2.3

THE FUNCTIONS OF ART IN A CAPITALIST SYSTEM

A GAME

TO PARTICIPATE IN THE GAME, PLEASE EXAMINE YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS WHEN DECIDING TO SEE A WORK OF ART. PLEASE THINK OF A SPECIFIC OCCASION, PREFERABLY ONE WHERE YOU HAD TO SPEND YOUR OWN MONEY TO SEE THE WORK AND WHICH DIDN'T INCLUDE A STRONG SOCIAL ASPECT, LIKE SEEING A SHOW OF A FRIEND.

**NOW THINK OF
YOUR FAVOURITE
SHOW, WHICH
BOXES DID IT
CHECK?**

**IF YOU MAKE
PERFORMANCES
YOURSELF,
WHICH BOXES
DOES YOUR
LATEST / BEST /
WORST WORK
CHECK?**

2.4 stage & knowledge

We have now examined the contemporary stage in relation to art philosophy, capitalism and the contemporaneity itself. In this part, we will expand the field to cover other forms of knowledge.

As an artist, it is difficult and sometimes unnecessary to draw a line between what is a professional opinion, what is a value-based argument or what is a matter of taste. The knowledge we possess is entangled, escapes categorisation and forms feedback loops with itself: our cultural context affects our taste, our taste affects what we read, what we read affects the vocabulary with which we think, how we think affects what kind of art we want to make, the kind of art we make shapes our cultural context and so on. We come to work with our whole selves, and if we're lucky, the work accepts all the knowledge that we contain as potentially valid, if not equal, bases for argumentation.

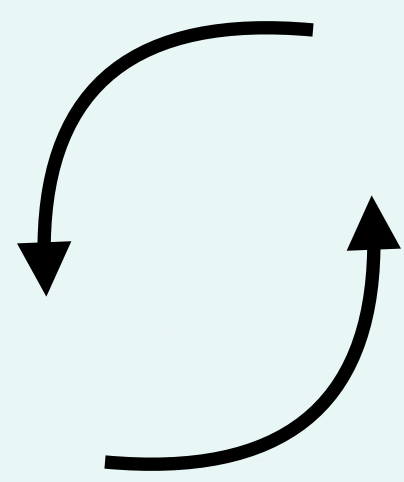
In a group working setting, such as performance making, it is sometimes useful to identify and articulate the position from which our knowledge is coming from. In the DAS-feedback method, participants are encouraged to express their opinions from a specific position: as a parent, as a feminist, as a white person, as a lighting designer. This kind of positioning can provide us with vocabulary, guidelines and context, and help us recognise the things that take place on the stage in a relatively shared spirit.

The positions we can assume are not limited to our professional and social roles, but we can also use other modes of knowledge as basis for argumentation. We could make arguments about a performance, or a single object within a performance, from the epistemological position of phenomenology, semiotics, feminism, christian symbolism, stage management, climate change, architecture or psychoanalysis, to name but a few. Not all positions have names.

When we look at the stage, we look it from multiple positions at once, like a cubist painting. Some of these positions are skill-based and are acquired through professional training. Some come from reading books. Some come from lived experience. Some, like feminism, are complex combinations of skills, values, vocabulary and practice. Some, like whiteness, might be so embedded in how us white people look at things that it is difficult to recognise as a position.

To illustrate this complexity, we will look at a common design element, the white dance floor, from 25 different positions.

Apologies for misrepresenting and being reductive towards your particular field of expertise!



lighting design - the floor gives a

nice bounce to the face even if the light source is located behind the performer

sociology - the way we use the floor requires cultural capital to be understood

economics - it costs a fortune to replace the floor if it gets

dirty

stage management - probably

a good idea to rig most of the lights before rolling out the floor to avoid moving on top of it with a lift

semiotics - the floor acts as a signifier

phenomenology - the being of the floor is experienceable as its whiteness and floorness

institutional art theory -

the floor grants an

object or action the status of art

colonialism - the floor is available to me as a 'terra nullius' waiting to be occupied

branding - the white floor distinguishes this performance from the one with grey floor

marxism - what were the working conditions under which the floor was produced?

environmentalism - the floor was manufactured and transported to the venue with the power of fossil fuels

art history - the floor is a reference to the 'white cube' gallery and its tradition of detaching objects from their everyday geographies

decolonial theory - the floor renders the Black body hypervisible

post-structuralism - the white floor has no referent in reality and has become its own simulacrum

dualism - the floor presents an opportunity to be on it or outside of it

christian symbolism - the floor symbolises innocence, purity

analytic philosophy - what do we say when we say that the floor is white?

platonian idealism - this floor

is a mere reflection of the 'idea' of a white dance floor

painting - the floor

is an empty canvas or a reference to

Malevich

somatics - how does the

weight of the body press against the floor

feminism - who has the access to this floor?

marketing - the eloquently

understated floor is another triumph from the paradigm-changing artist!

psychology - the floor is an empty

surface on which one can project their own desires

aesthetic formalism -

the floor has aesthetic value regardless of its meaning

parenthood - kids would love

to run around that huge empty space

theatrical representation - this floor is a field of ice or snow

Now that we have *clears throat* defined art and mapped out some of its possible relationalities with history, ideology and knowledge, we will move towards questions that concern even more specifically the main topic* of this book, Contemporary Stage (Design).

While the words 'contemporary' and 'stage' come in and out of focus in various parts of the book, I'd now like to spend a bit more time with the word 'design', as it might require a different type of 'splaining.

Anyway, first we will go through some both colloquial and professional uses of the word after which we will look at design in relation to other practices such as choreography and dramaturgy. Subchapters 3.3 to 3.10 will each add a new dimension to our understanding of (the design of) contemporary stages.

3.1 design & language

The Finnish language does not have a singular word that would cover the same area that the word 'design'. Instead, design is often translated into 'suunnittelu' (planning) or 'muotoilu' (design or more literally, "forming or giving form"). The former is mostly used in the stage context, which implies that design is something that is planned ahead, that precedes other events or even that it lays a groundwork for other functions to take place.

-> design is about planning

-> design is connected to the idea of "giving form"

In English, when something happens 'by design' it means that what happened was intentional rather than random

-> design is about working towards a preordained outcome

Almost any type of material, such as sound or a spatial concept, can be used in creating an independent artwork - for example in the genres of sound art and installation, respectively. If the exactly same sounds or spatial concepts are applied to a work of performing arts, they become design and the totality of the work typically becomes artistic property of the choreographer or director*

-> design is subordinate to the “content” of the work

-> the principal mode of organising human action typically defines the genre of the artwork

If a known composer produces exactly the same sounds as the sound designer, the piece might be considered a collaboration of two equal elements

-> what is and is not design might depend more on the institutionally recognised profession and status of the creator (of sound, space..) rather than the “real” materiality of what is created

***although this has been challenged by many both temporary and established collectives such as WAUHAUS**

Art is widely considered valuable in itself and its independence from having to produce any other value is often staunchly defended. Design traditionally embraces the union of aesthetic and practical value and the relationship between function and form.

-> design can have functional value within the artwork, which in itself resists functional value

Design and its sub-practices such as scenography, lighting design and sound design (help) make the artwork attendable, visible, audible (and recognisable as a work of art)

“...designing operates in a milieu of experience and experiment, connected to futures, presents and histories, in the middle of psycho, social and ecological materialities that it constructs and that it is constructed by”

**Jamie Brassett and Betti Marenko:
Deleuze and design**

“The designer of today re-establishes the long-lost contact between art and the public, between living people and art as a living thing”*

-> design is a factor in how relationships between art and life are formed

Anecdotally, design’s ability to enhance, decorate or streamline any given object to make it more desirable cannot be ignored

-> design provides an artwork with “beauty” and fetish value

-> design can evoke desire

Many sub-practices of design (sound, lighting, costume..) require resources (time, space, money, working hours) to happen

-> design is a factor in how a work of art becomes a production

*** Bruno Munari: Design as Art - it must be noted that Munari is probably referring to industrial or graphic design, but in this part we are looking more into the connotations of the word ‘design’ rather than theatrical design specifically**

To finish off the list, we will borrow another beautiful, if not exhaustive definition for design from Deleuze and Design:

“...designing is a process by which future possibilities tend to coalesce in/as the present, no matter the singular form this coalescence might take.*”

While this definition is almost too broad to be meaningful, it also manages to include a couple of key ideas that I want to stay with us moving forward:

- design is processual (problem, not result-oriented)**
- design deals with possibilities (and the active decision-making process about which possibilities are worth pursuing)**
- design might take different forms**
- design not only operates in different temporalities but also produces temporality**

***Jamie Brassett and Betti Marenko:
Deleuze and design**

3.2 LAYERS

In order to go further into what design can do within a performance, I'd like to take a look at what other operations are taking place in the making of the artwork. A good place to start could be to lay out the different professional assignments that can be typically found in a working group, such as.

performer

choreographer / director (writer)

dramaturg

designer

producer

While the “job” of these people is obviously to perform, choreograph, direct and so on, they can also be thought of working at different distances from the performances immediacy. Each practice opens up a new layer of knowledge about the happening at hand:

Performing embodies the questions that it proposes as the performance unfolds in real time. Choreography* can be used to set a dance in motion, (or non-motion) but it also steps out of the flow (or non-flow) of the dance and arranges it into an art object. Dramaturgy opens up a new layer of inquiry into how this arrangement is made. Design contributes to the performance's immediacy - you could even say that things like sound and light "perform" - but it also opens up a new layer how the performance-object becomes an experience. Production lays ground for the performance's immediacy, but also opens up a new layer into how this art-object becomes a production, or even a product that is "consumed" by its audience.

***choreography and dancing could be replaced with directing and acting with relative ease.**

Next we will spend some time with each layer. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive or airtight definition of any of these practices, but to concentrate on a few aspects that might help us understand design.

performance
choreography / directing
dramaturgy
design
production

Don't worry, this is just theoretical categorisation. In real life all this is obviously an indiscernible mess.

Performance

This is the layer where the performance unfolds in materiality.

This means the human (or non-human) action (or lack of action) on stage (or somewhere else) in front of (or in some other relation, or non-relation with) the audience (or just by themselves). The particular quality / energy / presence / being / aura / tonus in or with which the performer or object shares space and time with the audience.

choreography / material

This is the layer where the performance becomes an art object.

The work of choreography or theatrical directing doesn't really have an outside; all questions that arise "elsewhere" will inevitably resonate on this layer. Right now though, I am interested in how choreography and directing organize (human) action into material. This can take multiple forms, from pre-written text to improvised tasks or very open tunings that leave a lot of room for the performer. Regardless of the method, choreography and directing turn the flow of immediacy into a recognisable, and often somehow repeatable or otherwise manageable art object.

On some deep level I believe that performances are inevitably, radically, the sum of their parts: design, dramaturgy, performance, production, and all the named and unnamed things in between. At the same time, I think that the method of organising (human) action into material is often not only what determines the category and context of the performance (eg. dance, theatre), but what ultimately establishes the work as its own art object with somewhat clearly defined borders. The artistic signature, which choreographers and directors can grant to a performance with relative ease compared to any other performance professionals, can be also shared among the whole working group.

Dramaturgy / (structure)

If choreography and directing are methods of organising material, dramaturgy could be seen as a method of organising that organisation. Dramaturgy can be used to open an additional perspective on how the elements of the performance form relationships with each other, and how the performance as a whole forms relationships with the world at large.

Design

This is the layer where the art object moves towards becoming an experience.

Design is often used in the stage context to describe the “audiovisual” aspects of the performance. Because of the awkward and often technical nature of the word, it is mostly excluded from academic writing and newspaper reviews, that is to say, discourse.

When there is writing about design, it is often to highlight either its spectacularity or its ability to align with and support choreographic or dramaturgical ideas - rather than a critical analysis on the affective and meaning-making qualities of design itself.

I would like to propose an approach that is reminiscent to Bojana Cvejić's idea of choreography:

“Choreography doesn't merely precede a performance as the creative process that then culminates in an event, nor can it be reduced to a technical, craft-oriented definition...The making continues to operate in the performing in the sense that its problems persist and give rise to different solutions in the performing of, attending to and also thinking beyond the spatio-temporal event of the performance.*”

What I'm proposing here, is a way of thinking about design in the scope in which we think about choreography, or dramaturgy, for that matter. An open-ended set of tools and processes that can be applied to a work of art. The knowledge and manipulation of the stage, it's affects and signifiers. The knowledge and manipulation of time and space and the relationship between the stage and the audience. Also, but not only, the tool through which choices made elsewhere are made perceivable and experienceable. The knowledge of relationalities, art canon, visual culture, meaning-making, objects, structures, sounds, energy and affect.

[A similar relationship between choreography, dramaturgy and scenography as linked and individually complex fields has been proposed by the scenographic theorist Rachel Hann. While scenography would indeed be a more rich and accurate word for our purposes, especially in it's in literal and etymological meaning of 'the study of the scene', I have steered away from using it for two reasons. Firstly, I do not want to claim authority in the field of professional scenography, in it's colloquial meaning that is interchangeable with set design, in which I am not trained. Secondly, by insisting on the word design, and it's awkward entanglement with commercial activities such as product design and user interface design, I'm trying to bring design into focus as one of the more nuanced areas of study within theatrical arts without overlooking it's adjacency to more "explicitly capitalist" uses of the word.]

Production (periphery)

"Ei ole olemassa todellista maailmaa, joka olisi taiteen ulkopuoli. On olemassa vain yhteisen aistisen kudoksen poimuja ja laskoksia, joissa estetiikan politiikka ja politiikan estetiikka liittyvät yhteen ja eroavat toisistaan" - Jacques Rancière*

***this is a quote from Rancière's essay Les paradoxes de l'art politique, which is not included in the English edition of his book Emancipated spectator. It's very poetic, so I didn't feel comfortable translating it into English, but to put it bluntly, it just says that there is no real world that would be the outside of art, and that the politics of aesthetics, and the aesthetics of politics both connect and diverge.**

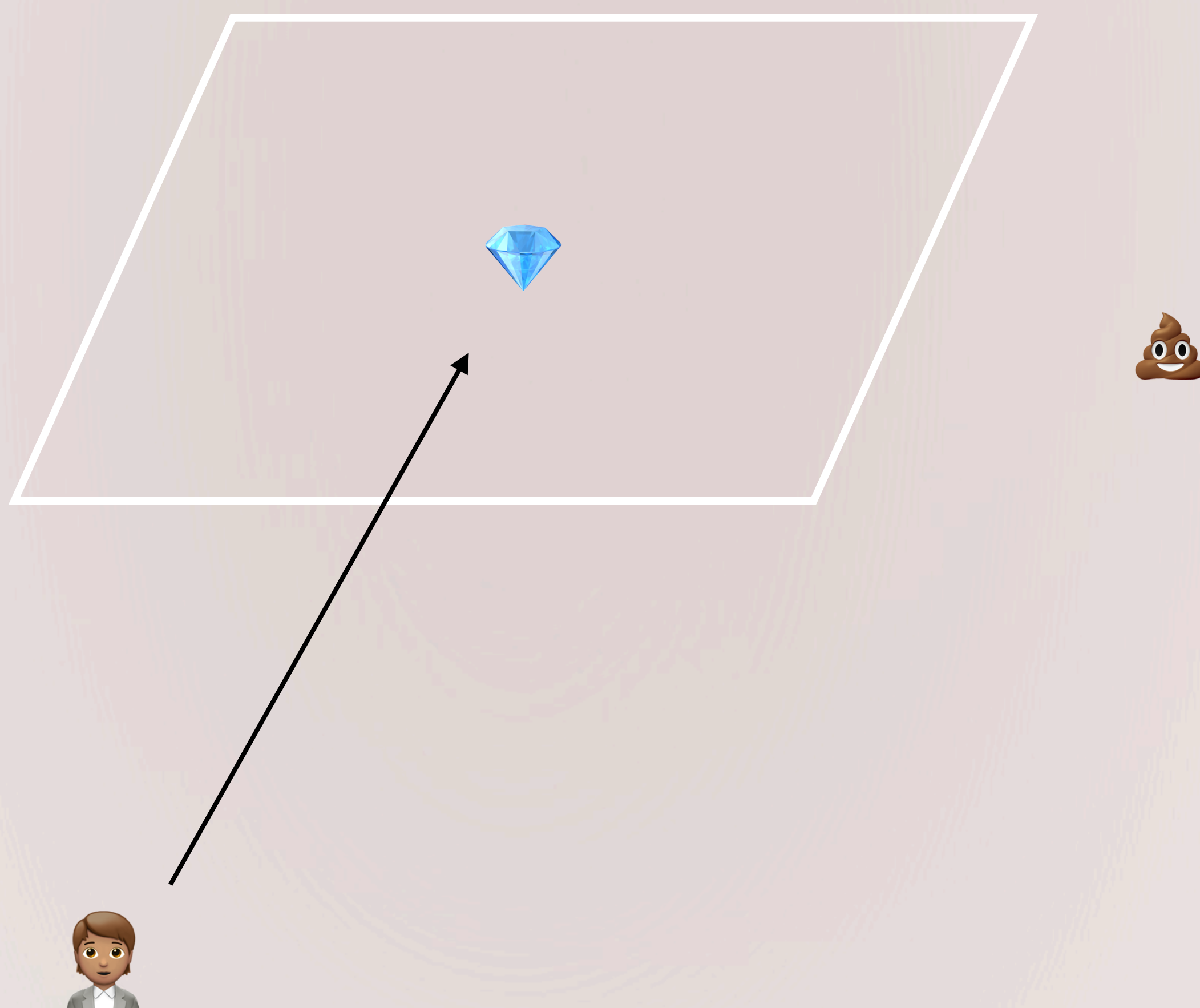
I will use the word periphery in at least three functions, which play a role in how the artwork is experienced, but which are typically not regarded as part of the work itself.

1 Periphery includes the promotional photographs, posters, teasers and post-performance discussions. These are either visually or thematically linked to the performance, but not parts of the performance itself.

2 It also includes the gender-neutral toilets, the temperature of the foyer and the angry ticket clerk. These are part of the audience experience, but often left out of the "content" of the performance

3 Within the performance, the word periphery refers to the black curtain, the things that are visible but in our theatre contract are left outside the art experience. This often includes seating, other audience members etc.

Using the vocabulary of Sara Ahmed, the audience is *orientated* away from the peripheral. The theatre proposes a straight line (artistic experience) between the artwork and the audience member, while putting aside the possible deviations into the “non-artistic structural and practical issues” as non-belonging to the experience itself.



The power to assign what is periphery and what is not is never neutral. It is easier to consider gender neutral toilets as peripheral to one's experience if one identifies the prevailing structuring of gender.

Same goes with other types of accessibility, from ramps, to language and ticket prices.

production

design

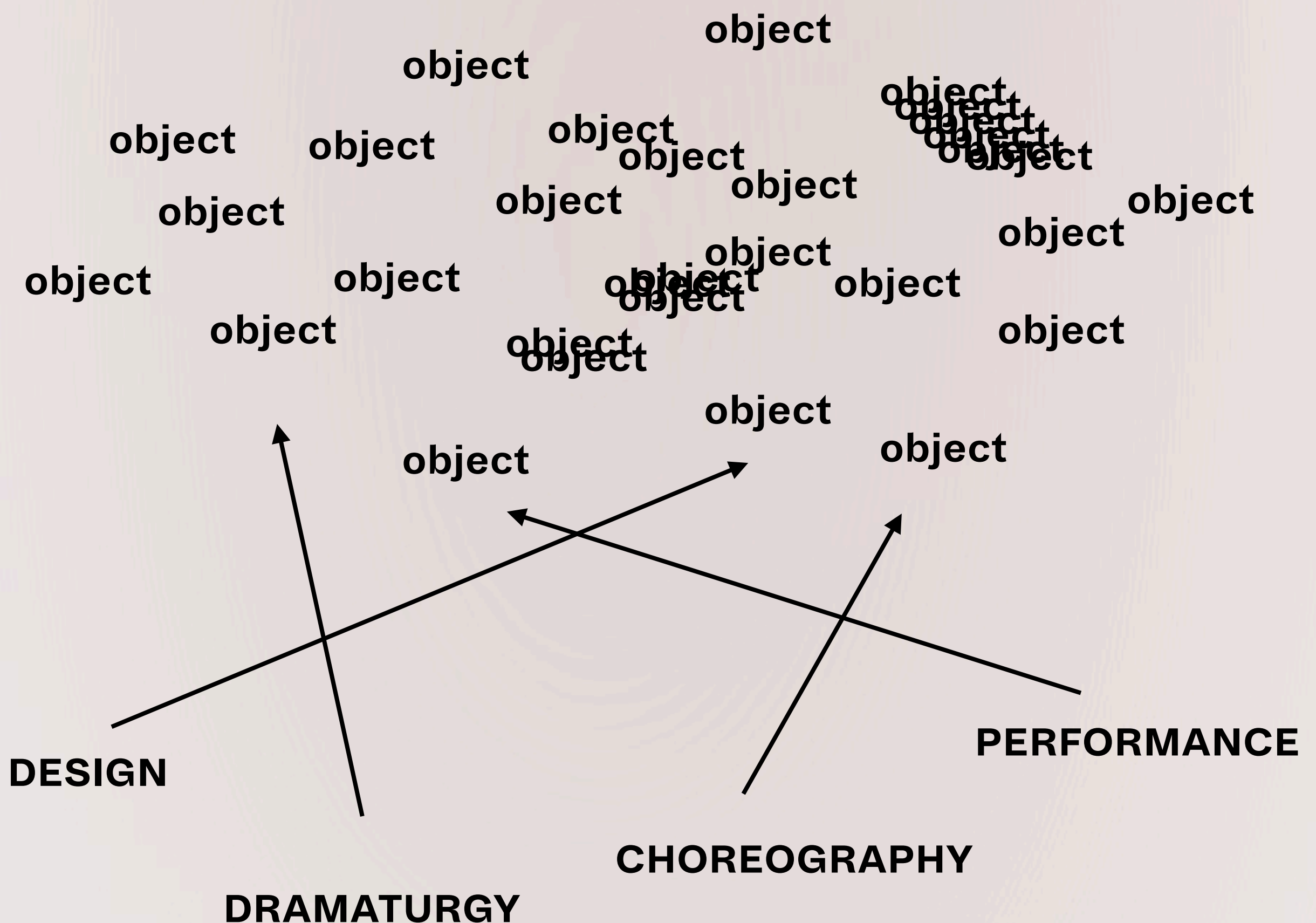
dramaturgy

choreography

performance

3.3 design does these four things

If the previous model felt a bit restrictive, another possible way of looking at this could be that design, dramaturgy, choreography and directing are all ways of creating, manipulating and producing (information about) objects and events on stage. As the distinction between an object (such as 'fake palm tree') and an event (such as *performer screams*) is not further needed here, we'll just call them all objects.



Design, as well as dramaturgy, choreography and performance could be then understood as distinct but overlapping practices that deal with stage objects.

(As a quick disclaimer, while I'm cautiously inclined to think about human action and non-human objects as existing on a non-hierarchical "ontological plane", it doesn't mean that I would consider them equally important in my work in any other sense.)



Anyhoo, while the previous idea feels kind of plausible, it does not tell much. What it is that design can really do to objects?

To build on what we already have, objects such as a 'fake palm tree' and *performer screams* occupy “real” time and space, so they can be arranged, or composed in time and space in different ways.

Objects that occupy space and time are required to have some kind of “real”, experienceable materiality, such as a frequency of sound, the tonus of a performing body or a cascading fabric.

The objects that we put on the stage are also capable of holding meaning. For someone the palm tree might mean ‘holiday’, to someone else, ‘home’.

But that’s really kind of it.

If we really boil it down, with design one can only do the following four things:

**choose if and where
objects appear**

**choose if and when
objects appear**

**affect the materiality of
objects**

**affect, but not control
the meaning of objects**

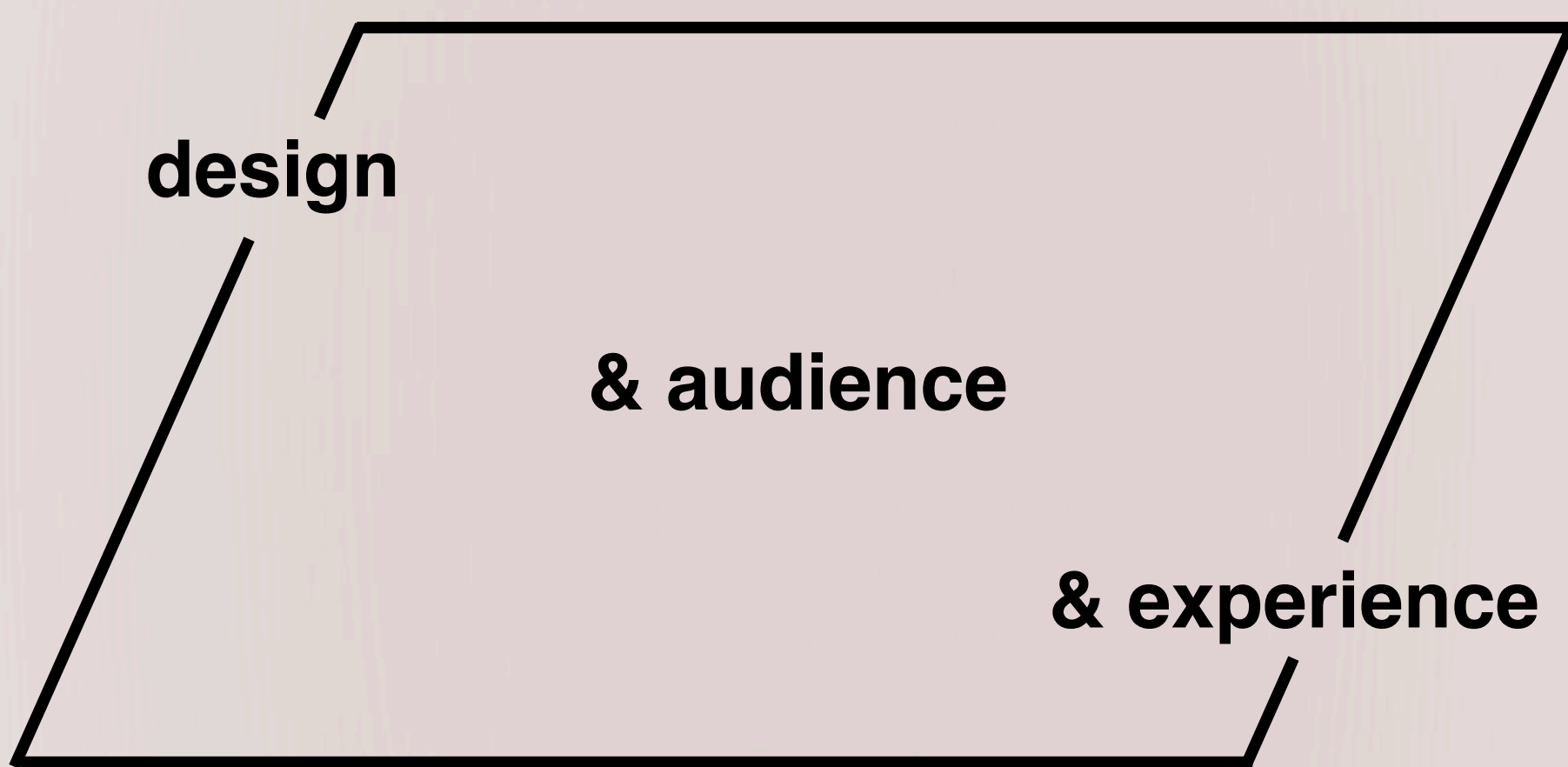
**Design could be then
defined as:**

**manipulation of
materiality and meaning
in time and space.**

applause

We will dive deeper into this in chapter 4, which is basically completely devoted to questions of materiality and meaning. Before that though, we will add a few more dimensions to this plausible but somewhat flat definition.

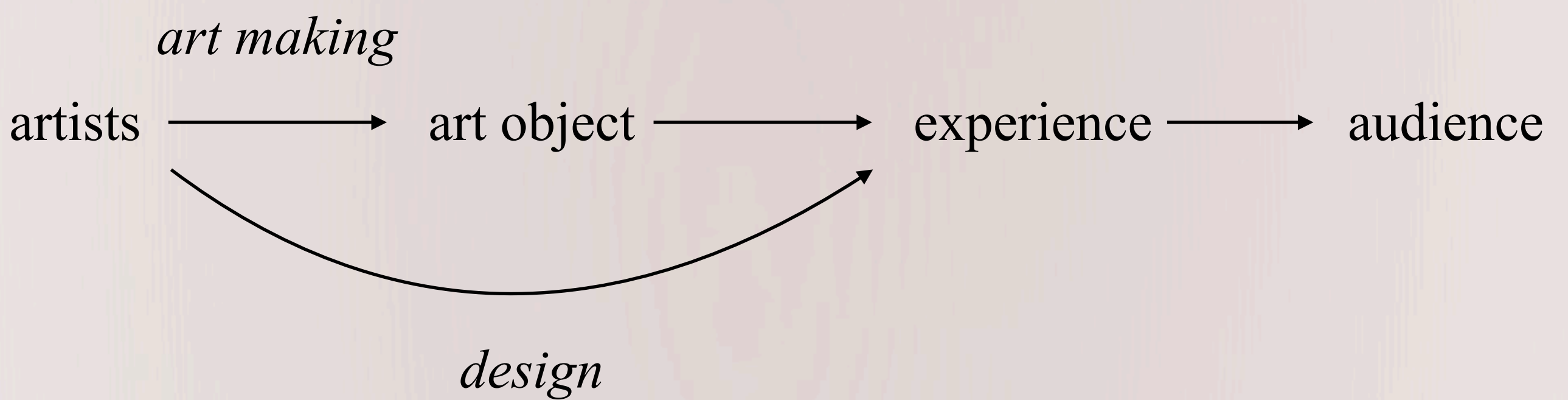
3.4



In order to establish a contact with the audience, a performance has to, one way or another, exist. Secondly, people need to be able to experience it, so they need to know where it is presented and at what time. If this information is not available in the media you follow, many relations between art and its audience will not happen. If the ticket prices are too high, only affluent people or people with connections will come. In short, a lot of very mundane but highly political things need to happen for the people to even arrive at the theatre.

A thought experiment:

Performances need to exist and somebody needs to experience them for them to exist in any meaningful sense. Why this distinction matters, is because design is something that is not done directly towards the artwork, but towards the experience of the artwork. Design assumes an audience.



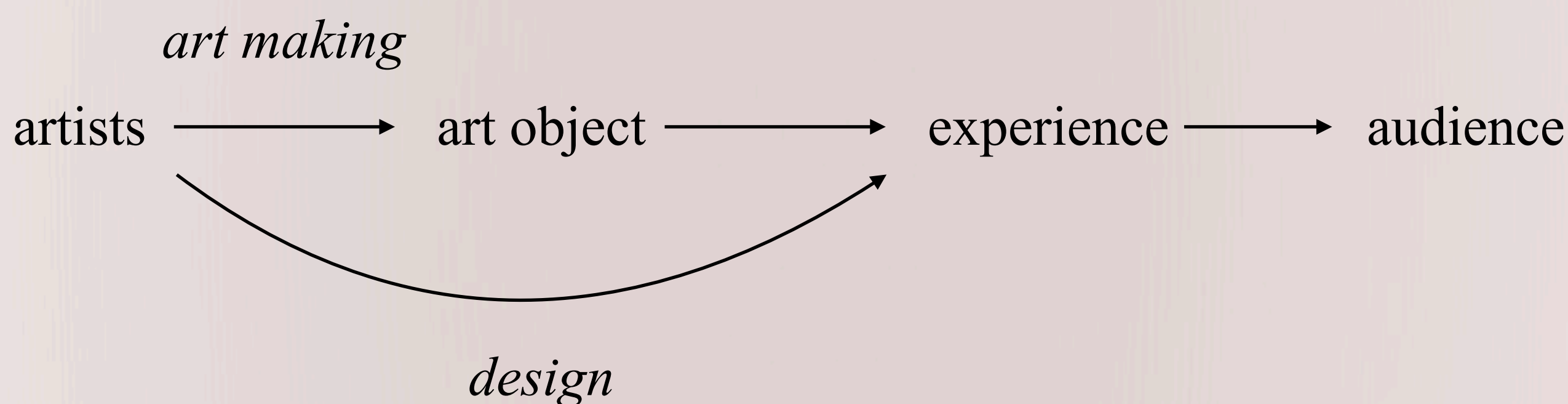
A performance, or any artwork for that matter, does not need design. It can just be itself and the experience will follow.

Design is applied, when needed, not directly towards the artwork but towards the experience, when there's a reason to believe that the artwork would otherwise not reach its potential as an experience.

Because there is no way of proving this possibly somewhat controversial idea, we shall look at some real life situations in which this might be visible.

A typical western contemporary dance piece is often created and rehearsed, for the most part, in some kind of a rehearsal studio. If you're lucky, the studio where you work might look like this: wooden floors, white walls, natural light. No heavy curtains, no poorly placed fire extinguishers, no steep and bulky seating banks that mess up the flat hierarchy of the studio stage. When moving to the actual performance venue, the first day is almost always a disappointment. The performance that used to feel so fresh and so articulate suddenly seems dragging and joyless.

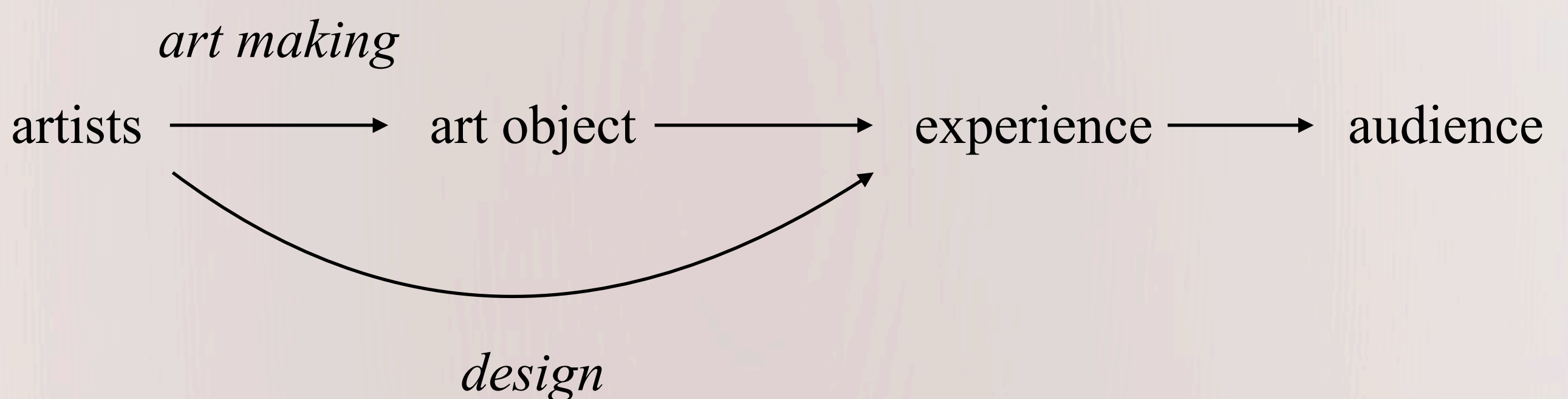
When the environment changes, the experience of the work can often feel both small and “off”. This is not only because our own experience of the work has changed, but because the theatre forces us to partly experience the work as if we were the audience. Our focus shifts from ‘what the artwork is’ to ‘what the experience of the artwork is’.



Performances don't need design to become experienceable. One could simply choose what to wear, choose what kind of music to play and then perform what they want to perform! What I would be inclined to call design in a contemporary stage context, is when these choices are made in relation to the experience of the performance as a whole.

Within this definition, designers can participate in “art making” just as well as non-designers can participate in design.

Within this logic, making an original piece of music for a contemporary dance performance might be understood as composing rather than design. Making a piece of music to fit a particular section of the performance, with the intention of producing a mutually discussed “quality” or effect, might be understood as design.



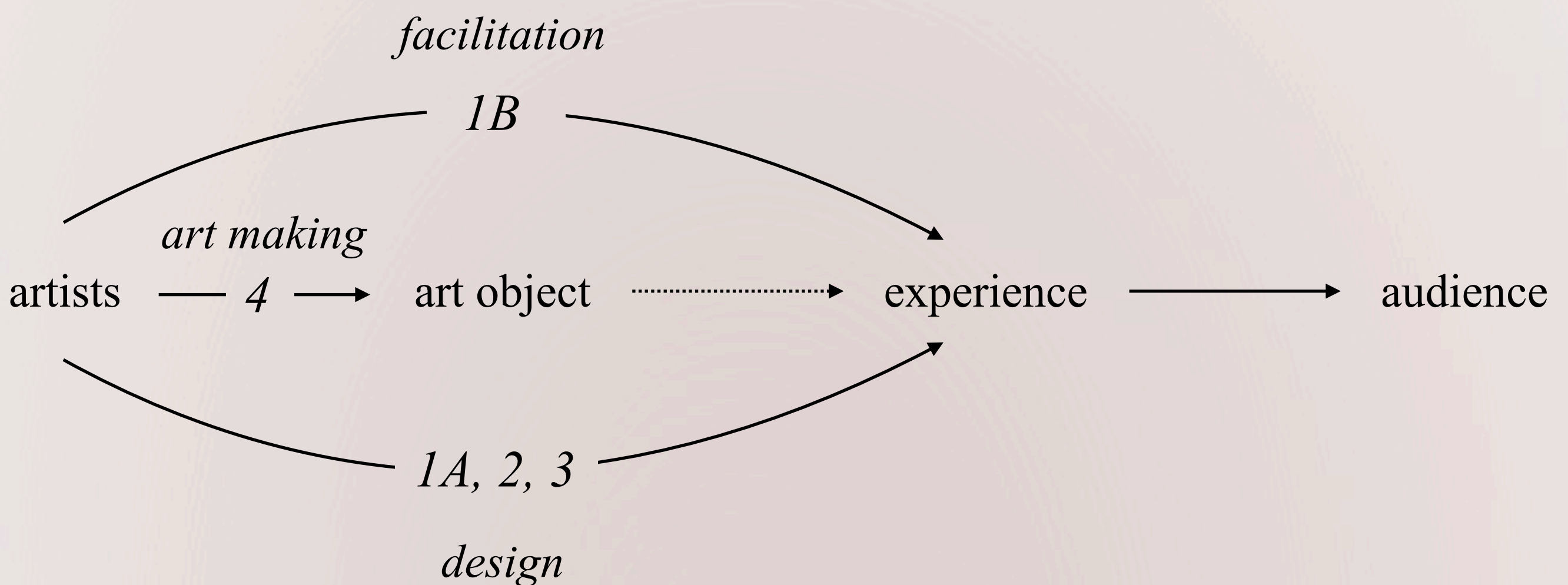
Design can do things within art, that art itself is not allowed to openly do. Contemporary art resist functionality and demands to stay open and ambiguous. The relationship between the object and the experience cannot be too fixed and stable. Design, on the other hand opens up a space where the experiential properties of objects can be discussed directly and functionally: “I put x here because I want the audience to experience y”.

Another example where the distinction between the artwork and its experience might make sense can be found in the following story that happened to me a couple of years ago:

I met some Canadian artists after a show that I had been working on. They asked me if I was also an artist, a question I had been asked a thousand times before, but I had forgotten what the standard answer was. In continental Europe, I thought it was quite ok to refer to yourself as an artist if you participated in the making of works of art, which is exactly what I do. On the other hand, I can remember many times when I was asked the same question in London art gallery openings, in which calling myself an artist was ok at first, but when I mentioned that it make lighting design, it was received with a polite smile and a "well it was nice to meet you".

In the show that the Canadians attended, Emmi Venna's *This world that we imagine in this room, might be used to gain access to other rooms, other worlds, previously unimaginable*, I was credited as “dramaturgical support”, in addition to which I was running the music from my computer. If I was participating in the work as an artist or not, was indeed a relevant question. I was certainly using both my “artistic” knowledge and my “artistic” skills in making of the performance, thus performing the work of an artist. At the same time, I felt that my involvement in the work was mostly consultative, so I did not want to claim any artistic signature over the work. And so I found myself thinking, in a Carrie Bradshaw writing her column kind of way: where does the work of the artist end or begin?

I use my artistic knowledge and artistic skills in the work I do, thus performing some sort of “artistic work” toward works of art. While my knowledge and skills are those of an artist, my role in different projects might vary. I was able to find at least four possible levels of engagement:



1A outside eye (no signature, consultative, artistic input towards the experience. opinions but no material input)

1B technical / practical help (no signature, material input but no opinions that don't concern the practicalities)

2 "designer" (signature of one part of the show, such as lighting, but not the show as a whole, artistic input towards the experience)

3 part of a working group (partial signature of the work, even if the work is credited to the choreographer or director, artistic input towards the experience, porous boundaries between individual practices)

4 co-creator (signature of the work - one of the initiators of the project, work is publicly credited to all makers, artistic input towards the experience and the work as a whole)

It is relatively easy to include this new emphasis on the experience into our earlier definition of contemporary stage design as the ‘manipulation of materiality and meaning in time and space’:

While many forms of theatre and contemporary dance are obsessed with real objects, in the end of the day we tend to be quite happy with things that look, feel and behave in a way that can be experienced as real. We tend to talk about the qualities of objects, like the metallic shine, gloss, weight or sharpness of, say, a shoe. As long as we can experience that “metallic” quality, it doesn’t really matter if the shoe is really made of metal. For practical reasons, it might actually make a lot more sense to not make it of metal.

If we turn our eyes towards the time and space, we could say that while objects such as 'fake palm tree' and *performer screams* have real, measurable positions in time and space, the stage mostly deals with time and space as they are experienced instead of what they really are. Objects are often placed so that they look and feel right, and their exact positions in the actual space are only measured if this feeling needs to be reproduced.

Materiality, space and time can be thought of as properties that exist “outside of experience”. If we leave a fake palm tree on the stage when we call it a day, it will be there occupying real space-time in its full materiality the whole night. Meaning, on the other hand, cannot exist without an experiencer who interprets that meaning.

3.5

design

production

structure

Design will always work, one way or the other, together with the existing physical, cultural, ideological and institutional structures. The size and shape of the theatres we perform in limit how we can work and what kind of relationships can be forged between the performance and the audience. The working hours of the staff dictate how much time we can spend in the space. Due to its literal and metaphorical rectangularity, the theatre favours square art and square working methods.

I approach the squareness of the theatre with the same strategy as when working in high places like ladders:

Remember where you are

Forget where you are

If you only think about the possibility of falling, you cannot work, but if you forget the possibility of falling, you might fall.

When working in a theatre, it is useful to simultaneously remember and forget that you are working in a structure that, as a default:

has historically been dominated by whiteness and maleness

is aligned with the ideology of its financial supporters (one way or another)

wants you to succeed (measured in high ticket sales and good reviews, not always in your own terms)

might want to promote institutional criticism on the surface, but might not let it affect how things are actually made

wants to help you make the work you want to make (but often with insufficient resources)

Working only in reaction to those facts might be quite daunting. Ignoring them completely could in theory be freeing and genius but more likely just lazy, thoughtless and outright violent.

When making art, one always forms relations with both how things are, and how things should be.

As an artist, it is easy to take for granted that what you do is shaking, disrupting, re-thinking, fighting and dismantling existing power structures. A lot of art does, truly, but it cannot be taken as an a priori, as a built-in fact of art making. As much as I would like to identify with the disrupter or dismantler, most of my tools depend on collaboration with the values, aesthetics, rules and the physical constraints of the existing structure.

When it comes to design, what can be done in the theatre depends on available resources and the designer's ability to communicate their intentions in a way that the institution can both understand and tolerate.

Elements such as fabrics, motor bikes or laptops are rigged into the physical grid or plugged into a network of wires that transport digital signals to different corners of the theatre. The maximum load capacity of the ceiling grid determines how heavy your design can be and the shape of your plugs determine what you can plug yourself into. In the end of the day, it's the local safety standards that determine what materialities can be explored within a performance; a huge sheet of plastic might be accepted as a set piece in Germany but deemed too flammable in the UK.

**how could design acknowledge,
but refuse collaboration with, existing
structures?**

**how could design be used to make
existing structures visible?**

**how could design ignore
existing structures completely?**

3.6 Rules

The contemporary stage is a powerful instrument that can be used to expand what is possible and imagine the unimaginable. To be able to properly “play” it, one needs to navigate a highly complicated web of unspoken rules and conventions.

This can happen in three ways:

1) not caring about the rules

Sometimes just doing your “own thing” and not playing by the rules might lead to groundbreaking art. More often though, not caring results in oblivious, violent, outdated or solipsistic art.

2) internalising the rules

This means being able to play by the rules and benefiting from the rules without knowing or caring too much what they really are.

3) learning the rules

Learning the rules of the contemporary stage can be both tiring and rewarding, just like gaining any other type of awareness. Knowing more about the rules means that work becomes more complicated and frictiony, but also more nuanced, intellectually stimulating and purposeful.

Sometimes knowing more doesn't only expand on what was already known, but it requires opening a whole new layer of knowledge. Working with the contemporary stage is, to use the popular metaphor, like playing a 4-dimensional game of chess, with multiple contradicting and unstable sets of rules.

3.7 contemporary loops

Next we will examine the contemporary stage as a site of mixed messages and contradictory desires. We will analyse how design is often asked to simultaneously:

separate art from life
/ bring life back to art

make the artwork spectacular
/ purge the artwork of the
spectacular

make the artwork recognisable
as art by being similar to other art
objects
/ make the artwork recognisable
as itself by being different from
other art objects

We will explore how the
seemingly mutually exclusive
actions in each pairing feed from
each other and form the braided,
looping structure that we call the
contemporary stage.

separating art from life

Institutions such as theatres separate art from life by simply building walls around art and then charging people money to get in. To further separate contemporary art from non-contemporary art, we often build on this quite literal, even geographical separation by fine-tuning the relationships between the contemporary stage and its surrounding architecture.

A good example of this is the use of white dance carpet. Very popular in Finnish 2010's contemporary dance, the carpet is often used to draw another stage on the stage by leaving a tasteful margin between the edge of the carpet and the walls of the theatre. This double detachment, first from "life" and then from "theatre", provides the stage with new powers and prestige.

The contrast between the white floor and the otherwise black space should be thought both in terms of function and connotations. If we, for a moment, entertain André Lepecki's idea that "choreography is to dance what pornography is to sex*", then the white floor is indeed the best way to achieve a pornographic type of hypervisibility. The white floor turns the black box, a place that is built for hiding and illusion, into a plane with nowhere to hide, where the surgical examination of objects is in the center.

***from the essay *Choreography and Pornography*, published in the *Post-Dance* anthology**

bringing life back to art

In terms of connotations, whiteness suggests neutrality, detachment and prestige that is typically associated with the art museum, which, as we know, is the master of steal.., I mean taking objects from where they belong and putting them on display. The museum has much more power in lending its prestige to outside actions and objects than the black box, but by using the white floor, the black box taps into this potential.

The museum effect is used, in the words of Theodor Adorno, for “conjuring up what has been temporarily prohibited and presenting it as if it were altogether fresh, and of relishing the violation of the modern taboo as itself something modern.*”

Like its predecessors modernism and post-modernism, the contemporary feeds on outside materials, such as pedestrian movement, techno or the right type of sneakers. Without the detaching effect of the white dance floor (or some other imaginable stage element), these objects might not be able to transcend their quotidian existence.

purging of the spectacular

When we say that something is designed, we might mean two seemingly opposite things. If you buy a white T-shirt and then dye it with a mix of colors, you have just designed a shirt by providing it with your unique human touch. Let's call this additive design.

On the other side of the spectrum is the iPhone. Every year, a new iPhone is designed and launched. While the device constantly gets new abilities and computing power on the inside, the physical design seems to be on a quest to remove everything that can be removed. After managing to remove the only physical button and the headphone jack, the design has revolved around tweaks that can be measured in millimetres. The object is closing in on an ultimate form, a theoretical 100% design, by chiseling out each last excessive atom. We shall call this subtractive design.

Contemporary stage design incorporates elements from both additive and subtractive design styles, but one could say that it is ideologically more aligned with the subtractive:

1) If we look at a common characterization of stage design that I partially subscribe to, “making space for something to emerge”, we can think of the contemporary stage as an iPhonean, empty platform for the exchange of meaning. If we would think of a performance as a sentence, design would not be the one who provides the words, but the breaks between the words, that make a sentence intelligible. In a way, design’s ultimate goal would be to make itself disappear..

2) Design could just as easily be thought of as a method of purging its objects from spectacle and glamour, perhaps echoing the reformative demands of Yvonne Rainer’s famous No Manifesto. However, by placing itself above things like spectacle, glamour, seduction and make-believe, the contemporary stage claims the power to determine which objects belong to an imaginary “core” of the art experience and which don’t. The tyranny of the spectacle that the manifesto was trying to dismantle, is turned into a tyranny of the core, the slippery essence that is left when everything else is removed.

providing the spectacular

When it comes to the use of the spectacular and the glamorous, the contemporary stage is sending mixed signals. On the surface, the stage seems to be asking to be free off all decorations, all excess, all spectacle, but if you read between the lines, it really yearns to be slathered with the performance equivalents of sugar, fat and salt.

A looping structure is formed between the two extremes: “free me from desire” and “fulfill my desires”. This looping allows for a design style that I call “spectacular scarcity”.

Think about the works of the moodboard-friendly artists Olafur Eliasson, James Turrell and Anish Kapoor. What these three succeed at is delivering the maximum amount of glorious ‘oomph’ while managing to appear free from desire, in a very solemn, kind of protestant way. Spectacular scarcity is achieved by reducing (here used as a cooking term that means boiling the excess water out of a dish to make it more dense and intense) an idea until it is on the verge of approaching, not unlike an iPhone, its logical endpoint. Objects that come near this endpoint tend to appear as if they are no longer even artifacts but they become nature, godlike.

design as the constant

Once, on a night out, I hit my face on the curb. Before going to bed, I had managed to clean the blood from my face and to erase the whole accident from my memory. In the morning, when starting to brush my teeth, I saw myself in the mirror. What was scary was not that I looked like I had had an accident, but the opposite: the only visible mark being my slightly swollen upper lip. This very subtle change completely changed the proportions of my face as a whole, and made me look not only different, but fundamentally strange.

The moral of this story is not only to drink in moderation, but that to see something as truly strange, most things around the thing that has been changed have to stay the same. This very particular combination of strangeness and familiarity is often called the 'uncanny', and much of the transformative powers of the contemporary stage can be found in moments of uncanniness.

Anyway, Jonathan Burrows' enjoyable a choreographer's handbook defines choreography as "a way to set up a performance that takes care of some of the responsibility for what happens, enough that the performer is free to perform."

A similar idea could be applied to design as it can also establish structure and rigidity that allows other elements of the performance more freedom. This can sometimes be true about the personal qualities of the designers as well, as they might provide generic professionalism and predictability to an otherwise unpredictable situation.

If we indeed think of design as “making space for things to emerge”, it often means not leaving the space empty, but using elements from the established art canon, such as white dance floor or classical music as stable backgrounds, against which new objects or new types of dancing can be included, or if you prefer, absorbed, into art.

The audience member might be more open towards changes in the “content” of the piece if it takes an already established “form”. And vice versa. While it is reasonable to not believe in the distinction between form and content, as a maker it is still useful to know what part of the work you want to shake. If we think of my face as a performance, the accident in which only one part of the face was changed, not only brought the swollen lip itself into examination as the “content” of the performance, but also affected the form, or dare I say, the dramaturgy of the unchanged parts of my face.

If is of course possible to change everything, and one should try to do exactly that! But if we want to make change itself visible as change, we need constant objects to measure that change against.



non-art



non-art



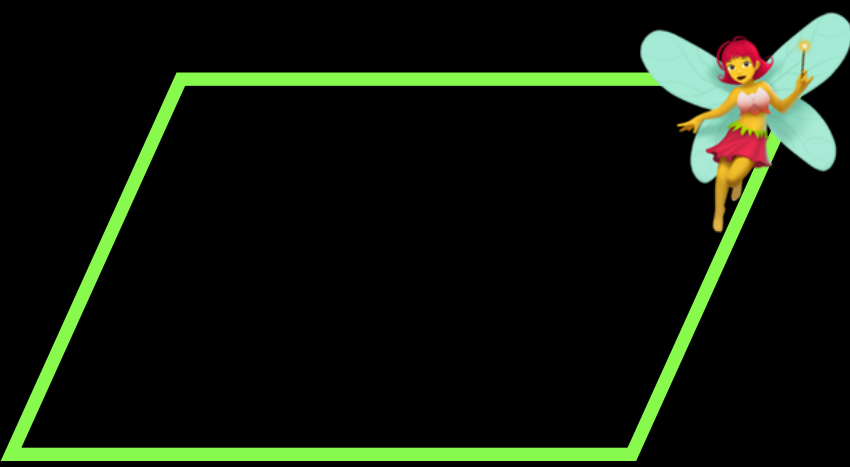
non-art



art



art



your art



art



non-art



non-art



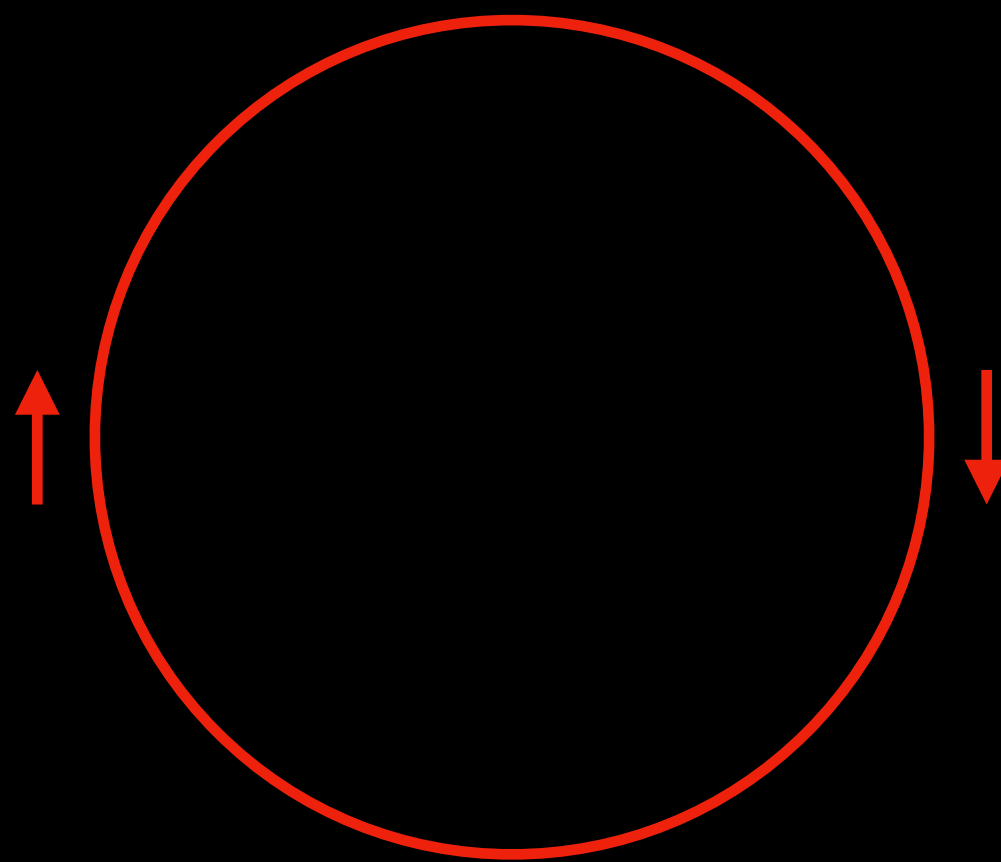
non-art

We often think, not without a reason, that performances are what they are because of their “inner” choreo-dramaturgical core, which often means placing things such as movement practices, subject matter and political aspirations above visuality. Still, we often refer to performances with very visual phrases such as “the one with the blue floor”, “the one with the motor bike” or “the one where they had the black contact lenses”. This ‘designed identity’ is often both the first part of the performance that we encounter when seeing its promotional photos online, but it’s also something that stays with us afterwards. The ‘designed identity’ works almost like a logo, thumbnail or the icon of an app on your phone, a visual door through which the performance can be partially recalled into existence.

Design needs to produce sameness and identity in very particular proportions because the market, including funding bodies, curators and audiences, demands sameness and identity in very particular proportions. This demand is very similar to Oscar Wilde’s vaguely motivational call to: “Be Yourself. Everyone else is already taken”, which suggests that you should be a recognisable yourself, but that you should also share the same category with “everyone else” and be recognisable as a yourself. Whether this should be thought of as an oppressive trap or an exciting, game-like proposition is up for debate, but we will come back to this in 4.3, a ‘who’ behind a ‘you’.

DESIRE LOOP (SPECTACULAR SCARCITY)

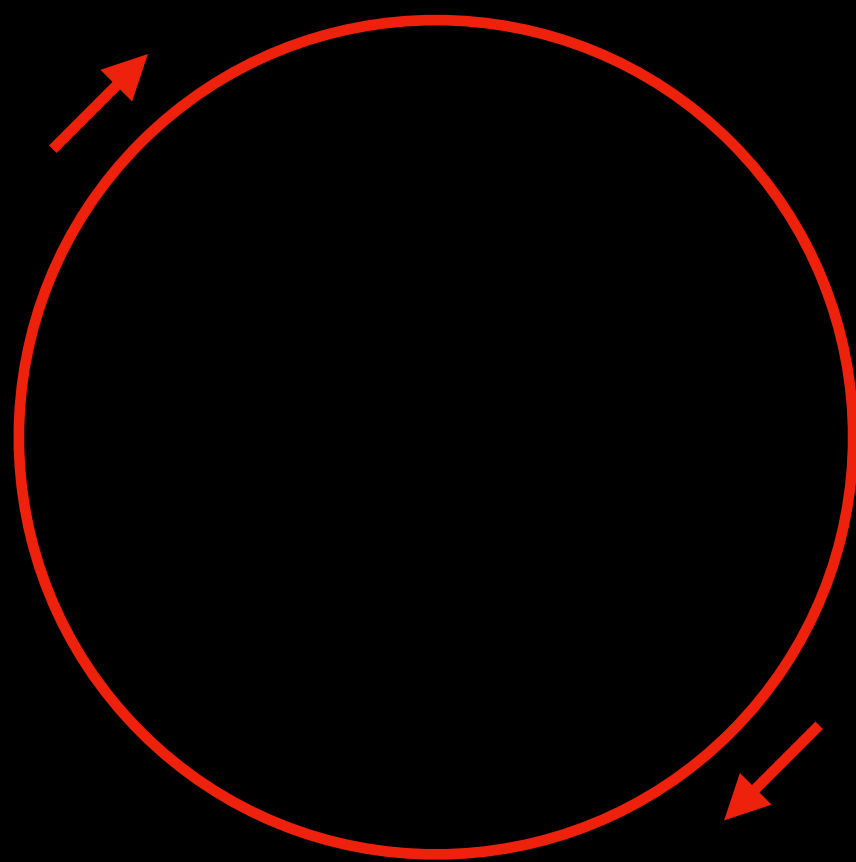
purge art of the spectacular



provide the art with the spectacular

IDENTITY LOOP

make art recognisable as an art object



provide art with a specific identity

3.8 attending

& observing

“Space acquires ‘direction’ through the bodies that inhabit it, just as bodies acquire direction in this inhabitation”*

One of the most crucial and consequential choices in stage design is how the audience will be placed, as it will define how every other aspect of the performance is both read and experienced.

It also

defines whether the audience member should consider themselves as an observer or an attendee, or more specifically, if the audience member is participating in the performance with only their eyes and ears, with their whole body, or even their whole “self”

**Some common audience
relation modes include:**

post card + fourth wall

post card

amphitheatre

audience surrounding performance

**audience attending, no separate
audience placement**

**performance negotiates space with the
audience**

**difference between audience and
performer is diluted**

1. Post card + fourth wall

A standard, modern theatrical seating consist of straight rows of chairs from which the audience member can, depending on their proximity to the stage, grasp the totality of the stage like a painting or a post card. This type of orientation implies both ownership (everything is there for me to see) and powerlessness (nothing is there for me to change) over the work. Deciding not to break the fourth wall implies both that the audience is not meant to be conscious of their surroundings or themselves and that the work is independent from its surroundings and this particular occasion when it is presented.

2. Post card + breaking the fourth wall

A common technique used in all types of performances, breaking the fourth wall makes the audience temporarily aware of themselves and how they share both a physical and a “cultural” space with the performers and the other audience members. The most obvious way to break the fourth wall is to address the audience from the stage directly, but it can also be done in designerly ways by say, abruptly cutting an otherwise "realistic" soundscape into silence.

3. Amphitheatre

When the seating is organised along a quarter, half, or even three quarters of a circle, like in ancient greek and some modern theatres, the audience is invited to focus on the work as well as the social event surrounding the work. Power dynamics within the audience are visible even if not deliberately explored.

4. Audience surrounding performance

In settings where the audience is either surrounding the performance area, or two or more sets of seating are placed on opposing sides of the performance area facing each other, the audience is invited to observe other audience members observing the work. This will inevitably make the audience member more conscious of themselves, (that is, self conscious). While just using the audience as it's own backdrop doesn't necessarily activate the audience member in any way, it does blur, or perhaps more accurately, explore the line between the performance and lived reality.

5. Audience attending, no separate audience placement

This is how most rock concerts and art galleries are organised: what is being watched, listened or experienced stays in one place while the audience members are invited to both choose their orientation (with some limitations) and change that orientation during the show. Not that common in a contemporary performance setting, this type of placement might be used to make the audience conscious of their relationship with the space, with the performance and with other audience members. In this type of setting, the audience member has control over their proximity to the performance, often so much so that it might be easy to just leave the performance altogether, something that the maker might want to take into account.

6. Performance negotiates space with the audience

In this mode, neither the audience nor the performer (or performance) have fixed places in the space. The audience member has to physically react to events in the performance and be aware that how they react might momentarily become the main focus of all other audience members. When deciding to use this explicitly experimental mode, the relationship between the performance and the audience inevitably becomes a core part of the “content” of the performance rather than just an underlying circumstance.

7. Difference between audience and performer is diluted

Sometimes a performance works without abiding by the audience-performer distinction. This could happen by making the audience member's singular experience or the communal negotiation between the audience "body" the center of the work. This (at least in theory) gives the audience member the maximum amount of agency and political power over the outcome of the performance, and allows them to reinvent themselves within the boundaries of the performance and their own personality.

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3.9

My generation (late geriatric millennial) of artists was brought up to claim space and ‘succeed’. Art could be unreasonable and excessive; nobody paid much attention to artists flying around or using vast amounts of plastic as set design, as the value of the artistic work was beyond measure. To participate in the grand project of art was somehow inherently ‘ethical’, just as the artist would automatically be assigned the role of the “dismantler”.

While artists, in perhaps more subtle ways, are still encouraged to succeed, the combination of climate crisis and the pandemic have challenged the expansion narrative.

[In the time of writing in July 2022, I am doing technical production for shows that will be presented in the autumn in Germany, which has just made cuts to its energy consumption in order to survive the winter. For the lighting designer, 'brightness', that until this point existed mainly as an aesthetic quality and an artistic choice, has just entered the category of the political. Perhaps one of the central themes of the past few years is that many artistic choices slip out of the artistic, and political and ethical dimensions open up unexpectedly.]

What I'm trying to address here, is that many "problematic" aspects of live performance, such as energy consumption, are quite easy to measure. The "good" that art can do, is much less quantifiable, and in my opinion art should never be reduced to an apparatus that produces any type of measurable goodness anyway, be it under the umbrella of mental wellbeing, creative economy or even providing "different viewpoints". So, what is the basis of any ethical argumentation, if the good and the bad operate in completely different axes?

The question would be difficult enough in itself, but the fact that performance makers work simultaneously with how things seem and how things actually are, makes it all the more complex. To put it more concretely, when we see 20 moving lights in a dance performance, we read it as 'commercial' and 'excessive'. Seeing 10 fresnel lights could be read as "understated" and 'natural', while requiring double the amount of power to operate. In a hypothetical situation where these different light setups would be already 'there' and equally at my disposal, I would have to make a choice between the option that, quantitatively speaking, 'is sustainable and looks excessive' and the option that 'is excessive and looks sustainable'.

The artist uses real quantifiable resources to make things. The audience uses real quantifiable resources to experience those things.

From the audience member's point of view the aesthetic pleasure / transformative experience / somatic empathy / entertainment / vibe / cultural capital / intellectual satisfaction / insight / scene credibility / cathartic sensation or emancipatory political awakening one might "get" from the artwork is measured against the real money and time put into experiencing the work. Every time I see a performance I assess it with the gaze* of a consumer who is expecting to get their money's worth. The amount of money that I spent on the tickets fundamentally alters the way I attune myself towards the work.

If a work of art is, in the lack of a better word, good, it obviously adds to the production value of the work but it doesn't fully determine it, as there are other factors in play. Would I rather pay 50e for an excellent solo by an unknown artist or for a so-so major work by an international superstar artist, I honestly cannot say.

***This consumerist gaze is one of many different, partly subconscious modes that affect how we experience a work of art. Actually, it is in direct contradiction with the supposed disinterestedness of the art-experiencer, an idea that goes back all the way to Kant. But I Kant talk about it more because i don't honestly understand it too well.**

Less used in the field of arts, the term 'production value' is often used to describe the value of a production as an experience. The production value of any given work can be determined using the formula:

Production value = (resources x treatment) x hype

With resources I mean the actual time, money, space and materials available to a given production. Hype could be thought of as the collective desire towards experiencing the production, whether manufactured through marketing or slowly built by forming a sustainable connection with a (local) audience.

hype = marketing + sustainable audience

From the point of view of contemporary stage design, the idea of treatment deserves a bit more clarification:

Treatment = labour + idea

In the context of the contemporary stage design, the concept of treatment is fundamental, as it is often the designer who is expected to make more of less, turning, or rearranging limited resources into a coherent artistic gesture.

An example: When a kid doesn't want to eat their piece of toast, you split it into two triangles and instantly they eat it. The unbearably banal piece of toast was turned into a desirable, thoughtful object(s) with a single cut. The treatment "cut" consist of the actual labour of cutting , as well as the idea, hypothesis or concept behind it. The accumulation of skill and knowledge that allows ideas to be formed is also a type of resource in itself.

Production value depends on the viewers singular experience, and it cannot be measured in real money. Still, it is reasonable to expect that the production value of the performance somehow corresponds with the price of the ticket. While a 55 minute solo work might be the most beautiful, thought-provoking and groundbreaking piece of art ever made, it is not necessarily something that should cost 30 euros to see.

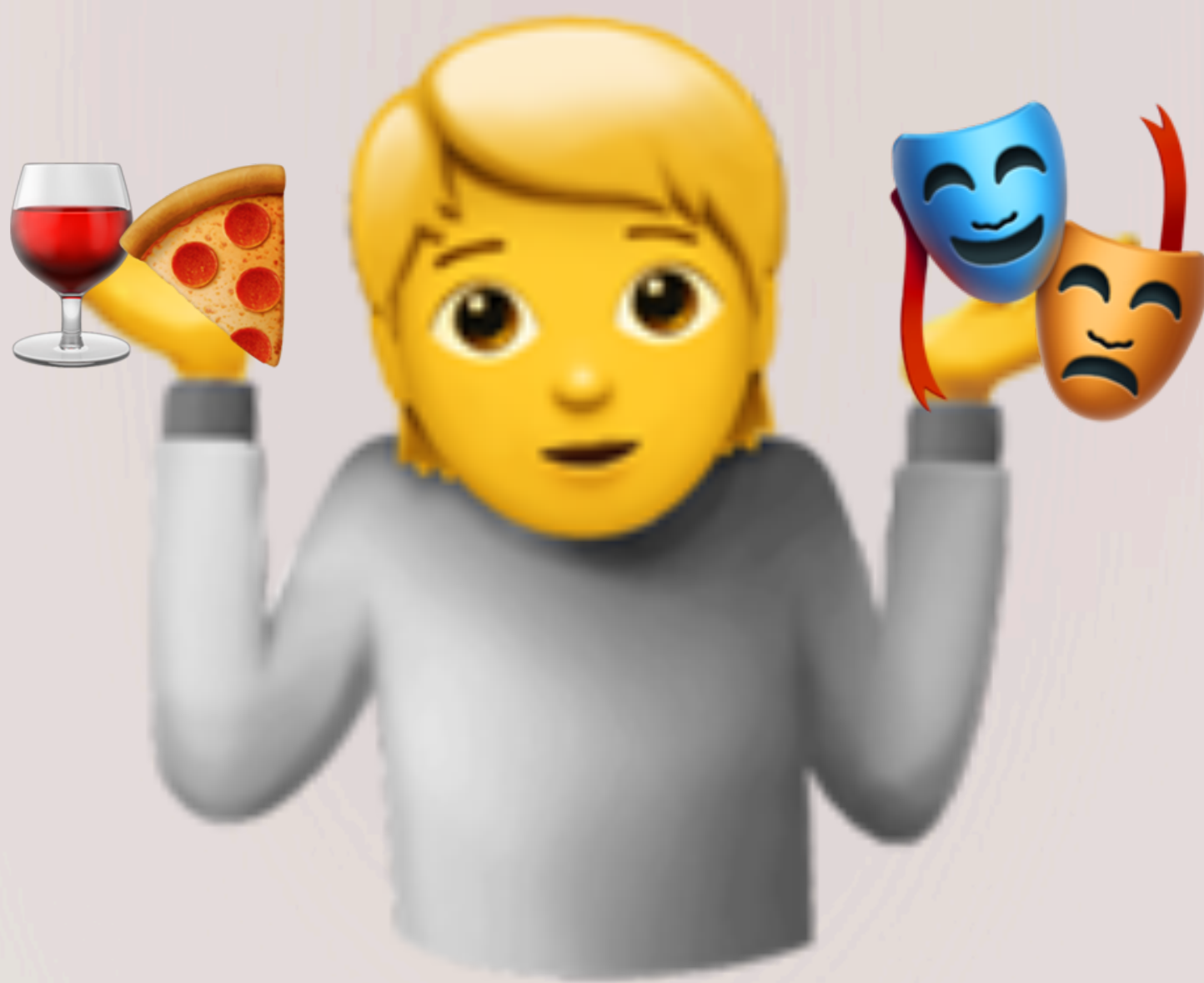
Bluntly, if ticket prices go up, the production value of the performance should go up.

The production value can be brought up by either the artist or the institution by:

- 1) increasing the amount of available resources (money, time, space, technical etc)**
- 2) increasing the amount marketing in paid media**
- 3) doing more with the existing resources**
- 4) audience outreach outside paid media (artist's own networks, social media etc)**

What we can see here, is that if an institution would rise the ticket prices without simultaneously increasing the amount of 1) resources and 2) marketing, it would be up to the artist to come up with the missing value by 3) doing more with the existing resources and 4) spending more time in audience outreach.

When ticket prices rise above a certain threshold, performances are vulnerable to being judged against other ways of spending one's evening.



3.10 the hourglass

The working process

in performing arts often takes the shape of a multi-storey hourglass, in which the field of what is possible either expands or narrows down. The shape of this oscillation is determined just as much by the internal artistic process as it is by institutional factors such as technical schedules and marketing deadlines.

It is very important to not let the outside demands screw up the internal process, but at the same time, deadlines from the outside might be exactly what the work needs. It is useful to try to collectively identify when the field of what is possible is getting bigger and when it is getting smaller, especially in contemporary dance, where the line between creating new material, and rehearsing and refining existing material is often blurry. (This is just for shape.) 195

Another type of oscillation happens between language and not language. Most artists start their artistic processes by writing funding applications and project proposals for the receiving institutions. Even works that try to escape language must negotiate themselves into existence through language. In the studio, we try to pin down and capture what was good in a performer's improvisation by finding the most precise words, even if we know that words could never fully exhaust what we just experienced. Then we try to convince the audience to come. What the work is, or is "about", must again be put into words. Attempts to work against this "aboutness" and the dominance of language in general, can paradoxically result in an even more impenetrable web of language.

As John Berger would say, we recognise before we can name that what we recognise.

As an experience, a performance happens similarly "before" language, even if it uses text as a material. As it unfolds, the experience is again translated into words, first by the voice inside our heads, then in private conversations and post-performance talks. If we're lucky, this textualisation of the experience continues in public by critics, scholars or influential Instagram users.

What kind of shape this discourse takes will fundamentally affect every single future experience of the performance.

Art flows in and out of language. We use language both as a tool for art's internal organisation and as its outer coating, which makes it an easy target for parody. It is a bit sad / funny though, that the professional language(s) that artists use is often criticised for being exclusive and pretentious, while a similar criticism is hardly ever directed towards any other professional jargon.

What is considered the right language in any given field, or in the society as a whole, is of course a question of power. By bringing words such as 'porous' (not solid) and 'becoming' (not stable state of being) into discussion, art can be simultaneously seen as

- 1) promoting inclusive values that quite directly contradict with the oppressive solidity and stability of categories such as 'gender', 'high culture', or 'normal', that societies are built on.**
- 2) promoting exclusive values, in that by using highly coded words art seals itself off from those who don't have access to the education and cultural capital that are required to decode these meanings.**

If we accept both as true, then what we need to determine is the right balance between the two in our given context. Sometimes big and difficult things require big and difficult words, connecting what we do into different histories and traditions. Sometimes professional art-making, whatever it means to you, needs professional, technical vocabulary just like any other field.

**The question is,
how to be specific without being exclusive,
self-aware without being solipsistic,
soft without being cringeworthy
surgical without being small.**



chapter 4:
objects and
events
in
theatre and
choreography

In the autumn of 21 I was invited to work in a production of Hamlet at the Finnish National Theatre. The production, which was directed by Samuli Reunanen, was mostly lovely, even if covid was doing its best to turn everything that used to be normal and pleasurable into something unstable and anxiousness-inducing. Covid also made me hypersensitive to things like distances and sense of space, which I decided to consider at least partly (what choice did I have) as an advantage, as something that I could "use" in my work.

While some parts of my newlyfound sensitivity could be attributed to covid, there was also something in the very logic of theatre that disconcerted me, I just couldn't quite pinpoint what it was. Luckily enough, I was invited to speak to a group of MA lighting design students about the piece, so I had a good reason to spend some time overthinking this. The topic of the talk turned out as "working in the theatre as a 'choreographic' designer".

The more thought I put into it, the more I begun to see the fundamental differences in how these two, seemingly neighboring art forms approach the stage. The difference between theatre and choreography couldn't be reduced to differences in working culture, methodology, history, resources or where the two arts stand within the larger cultural context, although all those differences do play a part. Instead, I was drawn to the differences in the ways that the two art forms understand objecthood and being.

The following chapter is devoted to the particularities of the choreographic and the theatrical stage, and how these particularities can be taken into account in artistic work. I am especially interested in how the two artforms understand (and prioritize) representation, materiality, space and time - the four main areas where design can operate.

A few disclaimers before we start:

This chapter is not intended to provide a broad and thoughtful overview of theatre and choreography as artforms. It is, just like all the others, written from within the very limited working experience of a single performance maker.

Many of the methods that I have here unfairly attributed to a theoretical category of 'theatre', are exactly the same ones that many theatre makers, including but not limited to Bertolt Brecht, have been trying to dismantle.

While this chapter is perhaps more technical and “out there” than others, it is born out of a question that is relatively concrete: how does the way objects behave affect the kind of art I can make?

4.1 materiality and representation

“Art is not only about something, it is something, a work of art is a thing in the world”

- Susan Sontag: On Style

Every object or event that takes place on the stage has a material dimension and a representative dimension. Material dimension includes things such as the frequency of a sound, the distance between two bodies or the weight of a fabric. The representative dimension encompasses all the meanings that the objects can stand for - a piece of music could evoke the meaning ‘1980’s New York’ or the bodily gesturing of an actor could evoke the meaning ‘aggressive’. How we interpret these meanings depends on our personal histories and cultural context.

The meaning is located neither in the object nor the interpreter, but rather somewhere in between. “For it is true that we both elicit the image from things and imaginatively project the image into things in one and the same process”*. Meaning can be experienced, but it does not ‘exist’ as an independent property of the object.

The materiality of an object, in lack of a better word, ‘is’. While our sensory capabilities might affect how we experience an object’s ‘being’, and our cultural context might affect how we would describe the object’s material properties such as size and location, it does not mean that those properties are not actual. Why?

***Hans-Georg Gadamer: “The Relevance of the Beautiful”**

One interesting way of thinking about this can be found from Graham Harman's "Object-Oriented Ontology" in which he develops philosopher José Ortega y Gasset's idea of an 'I':

"...each of us is an I not because we each have a special zoological apparatus called 'consciousness', but because each of us is something, and that something can never be exhausted by conscious introspection any more than outward description. It follows that every non-human object can also be called an 'I' in the sense of having a definite inwardness that can never fully be grasped"

In this spirit, we can think of an objects material existence as existing 'from its own viewpoint'. The object (or event) occupies time and space not only in the spectator's field of view, but from within itself.

All objects "have" both materiality and representativity. It is impossible to imagine an object that would just "be", without evoking any referent outside of itself. Similarly, no object can exist without materiality, be it the physical material of which the object is made, or the combination of physical forms that our mouth takes when phonetically uttering an idea.

This is especially important in artistic work. Any "abstract" painting will always have its referents outside of itself, whether in nature or psychic states, in other "abstract" works, or the 'artobjecthood' itself. Similarly, the "abstract" moves of the dancer can never be fully emancipated from the psychological / narrative / representative connotations that come from being human.

On the other end of the spectrum, no idea, theme, topic, story, mood, vibe, or statement can be represented without a material medium, such as the phonetics of spoken language, the typography of written language, the physical gesturing of the actor or the bass frequencies of the subwoofer.

Materiality and representativity are not zero-sum properties of an object, in a way that when the other property increases the other goes down the same amount. You could even say, that the most interesting objects (both whole works of art and objects within those works of art) tend to have "a lot" of both. A great novel is not a great novel only because the story and characters are interesting, but because the texture, rhythm and weight of the words become experienceable as materiality. A great stage design provides the performance not only with spatio-temporal experienceability as material, but also a medium in which new combinations of meaning can be negotiated.

The idea that is not plausible is that an object could fully transcend either its materiality or its representability. In other words, an artist or a designer can never choose to work with one and ignore the power of the other - although we have certainly tried, and failed! While failing to address the materiality of an object often results in nothing worse but a kind of bad, hollow work of art, failures in representation range from unharmed out-datedness to cultural appropriation and enforcement of violent stereotypes.

Any attempt to make non-representational or abstract art, if that is even a thing nowadays, is suspect to the fact that even if something doesn't mean anything to me, it doesn't mean that it doesn't mean anything to you. Using a techno song "as a material" in a performance does not mean that it doesn't carry within itself a lot of reference points, such as 'night club', 'Blackness' or 'Detroit', that we might or might not be well-equipped to address. Even in a situation where we do want to use a song both for its materiality and its representativity, it is impossible to take into account every combination of meanings that the song could evoke in the audience.

So, how does one work with representation if what an object represents to each individual is ultimately beyond our control? By trying their best I suppose. This could mean just doing your homework on a given subject, making sure that you work with a diverse group of people that have different viewpoints and knowledge, and also acknowledging the fact that not everything has to be made available to you as material :)

Next I will discuss the materiality and representativity of objects in relation to what could be described, somewhat reductively, as the 'theatrical' and the 'choreographic' approach to performance making.

6.2 theatrical and choreographical representation

I have been working as a designer in \approx 30 works of performative arts. Probably around 30% of those works could be crudely classified as “theatre”, 20% as “choreography” and 10% as “live art”. The remaining half consists of works made by choreographers under the discursive and institutional umbrella of ‘contemporary dance’, but which deploy a lot of theatrical elements such as dialogue and costumes, and more importantly, make the transformative power of the stage tangible by using representation as a tool.

An example can be found from Sonya Lindfors's 2016 work *Noble Savage*, in which a Black female dancer introduces herself on the stage as 'John Smith', the male white saviour character from the Disney film *Pocahontas*. The scene, in which a speech act* is used to conjure up whiteness as a visible property rather than an underlying, invisible norm, becomes a part of the audience member's "real" lived experience just as any "real" event.

*** John L Austin's speech act theory proposes that language not only communicates information but also performs actions, such as promising, commanding, or becoming.**

Still, this action does not turn the work of choreography into a work of theatre, even if it uses its tools and explores the border (or lack of border) between the two. This can be explained quite easily just by institutional factors: the Black woman was a known dancer (Esete Sutinen), who was performing in the work of a known choreographer (Sonya Lindfors), in an institution typically known for presenting dance (Zodiak).

While that explanation is probably 'true', I'd like to explore another route: The explicit introduction of the character 'John Smith' only reinforces the fact that contemporary dance, as a default, does not deal with 'characters' but with bodies. Its dominant mode of being is that of materiality rather than representation, and this does not change when representation, as a tool, is introduced.

We could also look at the speech act: "I am John Smith" as what Bertolt Brecht would call a distancing effect. The aim is not to make the audience believe in the character, but instead make them aware of the contracts and more importantly, the negotiability of the contracts that govern both the theatrical situation and the human life as a whole. In this particular case, the speech act both makes 'Blackness' and 'whiteness' visible as equally detectable categories, and expands the possibilities of a what the Black body can perform on a contemporary stage.

According to my limited working experience, theatre, even after having been influenced by Brecht and others, is built on representative fiction, which emphasises the meaning of objects over their materiality. This is very evident in the common act of making an object, such as a bed, to look very realistic in terms of period or style, while also adding wheels on it to make it move more smoothly across the stage. The visual ‘bedness’ is communicated to the audience, but our ability to experience the materiality ‘bedness’, which includes our kinesthetic understanding of beds as heavy, safely fixed objects or even our ontological understanding of beds as fixed “places”, is sacrificed.

Susan Leigh Foster’s “Reading Dancing” provides us with four modes of choreographic representation: resemblance, imitation, replication and reflection. Leigh Foster uses the example “I am river”, “I am like the river” and “I am riverness”, to illustrate the difference between the first three.

If we now think of the wheeled bed against these examples, we can see that it can claim that:

“I am bed”, in a sense that it looks like a bed and successfully communicates the meaning ‘bed’ to the audience.

It can partially claim that:

“I am like the bed”, because you can lie or sit on it. But when the bed is frictionlessly wheeled in and out of the stage, it behaves in an unbedly way. The bed is ‘like a bed’ in a sense that it can support bodies, but not ‘like a bed’ in a sense that it moves more like shopping cart.

What might be difficult to claim is:

“I am bedness”, if we think of bedness as a quality that comprises of other qualities such as ‘safety’, ‘fixed’, ‘private’, ‘warmth’, ‘soothing’. If it was these qualities that you are looking for, you might want to reverse-engineer what bedness can be and turn it into something that the audience could experience as a materiality. We will develop this idea in 5.11 “Verbs”.

Spoiler alert: Succession

Logan Roy's last line in the popular tv-series Succession goes: "You are not serious people". He is of course referring to his superficial and incompetent kids who are jockeying for his spot in the company. What Logan Roy, or perhaps his actor Brian Cox has, is often called gravitas. When a person has gravitas, they have a firm, weighty standing in this world. Unlike charisma, it is not so much related to how a person performs to the outside world, but rather a sense of inward rootedness in ones own being. Roy-Cox is 100% gravity, gravitas, weight. His words have weight. He uses the weight of his body to dictate the rhythm of a room. He is the biggest, most weighty object towards which other objects gravitate, and in whose orbit they are forced to circulate.

If Cox-Roy embodies weight, the kids-actors embody the lack of it. Kieran Culkin's weightlessness is nervous, while Alan Ruck's character Connor feels not only weightless, but incapable of supporting the weight of anything more than a wine glass. What is common to both Jeremy Strong's and Sarah Snook's characters is that they both constantly try to appear less hollow than they are. As if they are trying to fake gravity while walking on the moon.

It's no coincidence that the word 'gravity' is used both to describe the force that give us weight and seriousness. Beds with wheels are not serious objects, in a similar manner than the Roy kids aren't serious people. Seriousness, in this sense, doesn't mean the opposite of comedy or fun, but more that a thing has an "inward rootedness" that makes it, I don't know, respectable, as itself. Why should I "respect" the wheeled bed, when it makes a mockery out of my existence in the world as a weighty and frictiony human being?

What happens with the wheeled bed, is that the amount of things that it wants to represent is more than its materiality can support. We could call it a bankrupted object, because it "spends" more in representativity than it "earns" in materiality.

Interlude: small sculptures

I once went to an opening of an art school graduation show in London. Hundreds of people wandered the narrow hallways between the small artist studios that were now used as galleries. I had to be very careful to avoid literally tripping over pieces of art that were scattered around the floors, cigarette-carton sized small sculptures mostly, each set of works being pretty difficult to tell apart from one another in the bustle of the opening.

I met an acquaintance, a student at that particular school, who asked me what I thought of the show. "A lot of small sculptures on the floor it seems", I said, without any sense of irony from my part. "Hah, there are some people who actually think that way!", he exclaimed, as if I had said something so glaringly ignorant that it could be only understood as a joke.

I don't know which was the bigger faux pas

- 1) the fact that i described the physical properties of the objects rather than presenting a more nuanced take on the hidden, and therefore more valuable "substance" of the artworks*
- 2) the fact that I was not able to separate my own physical experience of being in the unpleasantly cluttered show from what should have been a disinterested experience of art.*

In either case, my failure or unwillingness to see past the surface was so outrageous, that it could be only understood as a joke.

4.3 the 'who' behind a 'you'

The idea that the surface or the appearance of an object is only a cover for some hidden truth is quite common, but when you think about it, pretty paranoid. I would go so far as to say, that contemporary western culture, which is often criticised of being too superficial, might be even more obsessed with depth. Contemporary dance is difficult to many, not because it's somehow super deep, but because it insist that we spend time with the superficiality and materiality of things: how things are. It's hard to look at a body in space if the culture as a whole is obsessed with the who, the why, and what does it all mean?

Superficial and material things are real, but they fail to satisfy our appetite for realness. When the surface is cracked open, like when the tears of a reality tv-contestant leak from the inside to the outside, we intuitively understand that as invitation to enter a new uncharted, unscripted level of realness. Oh, this is who you really are?

Arne de Boever:

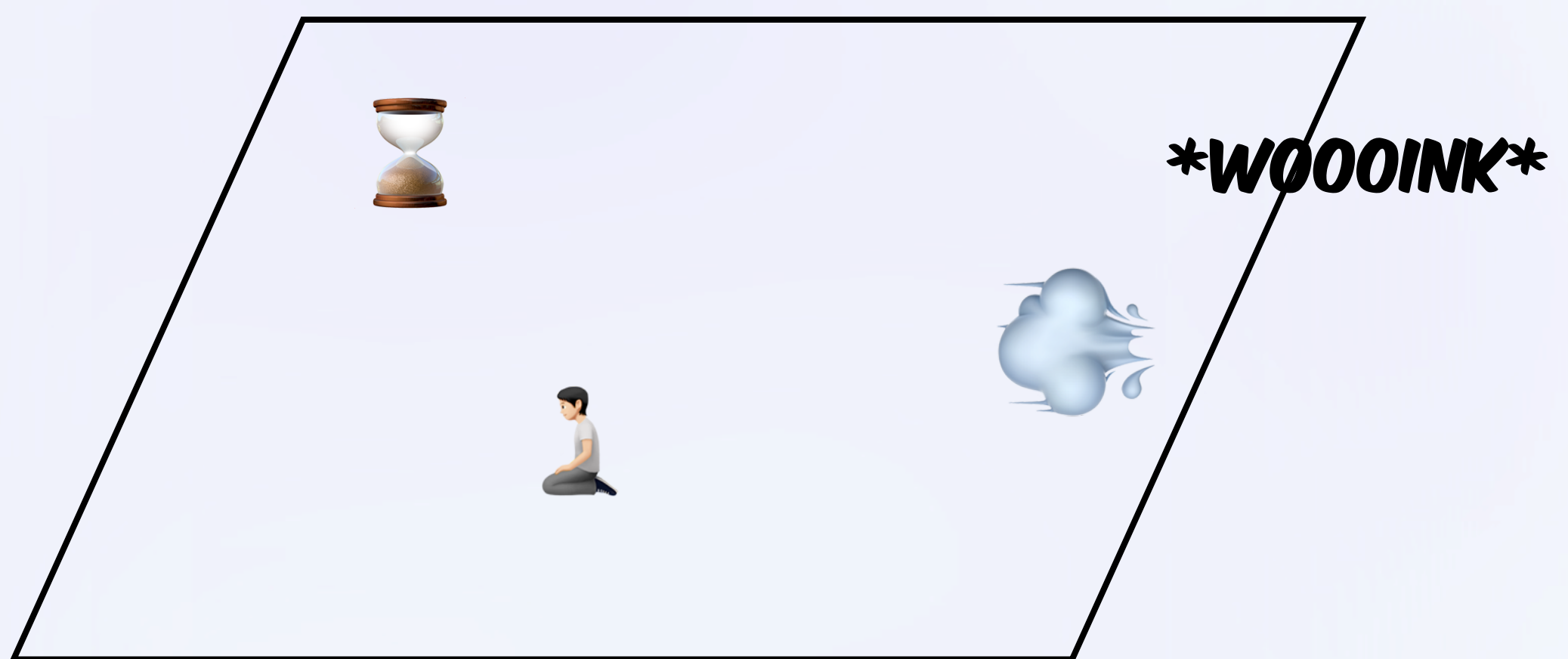
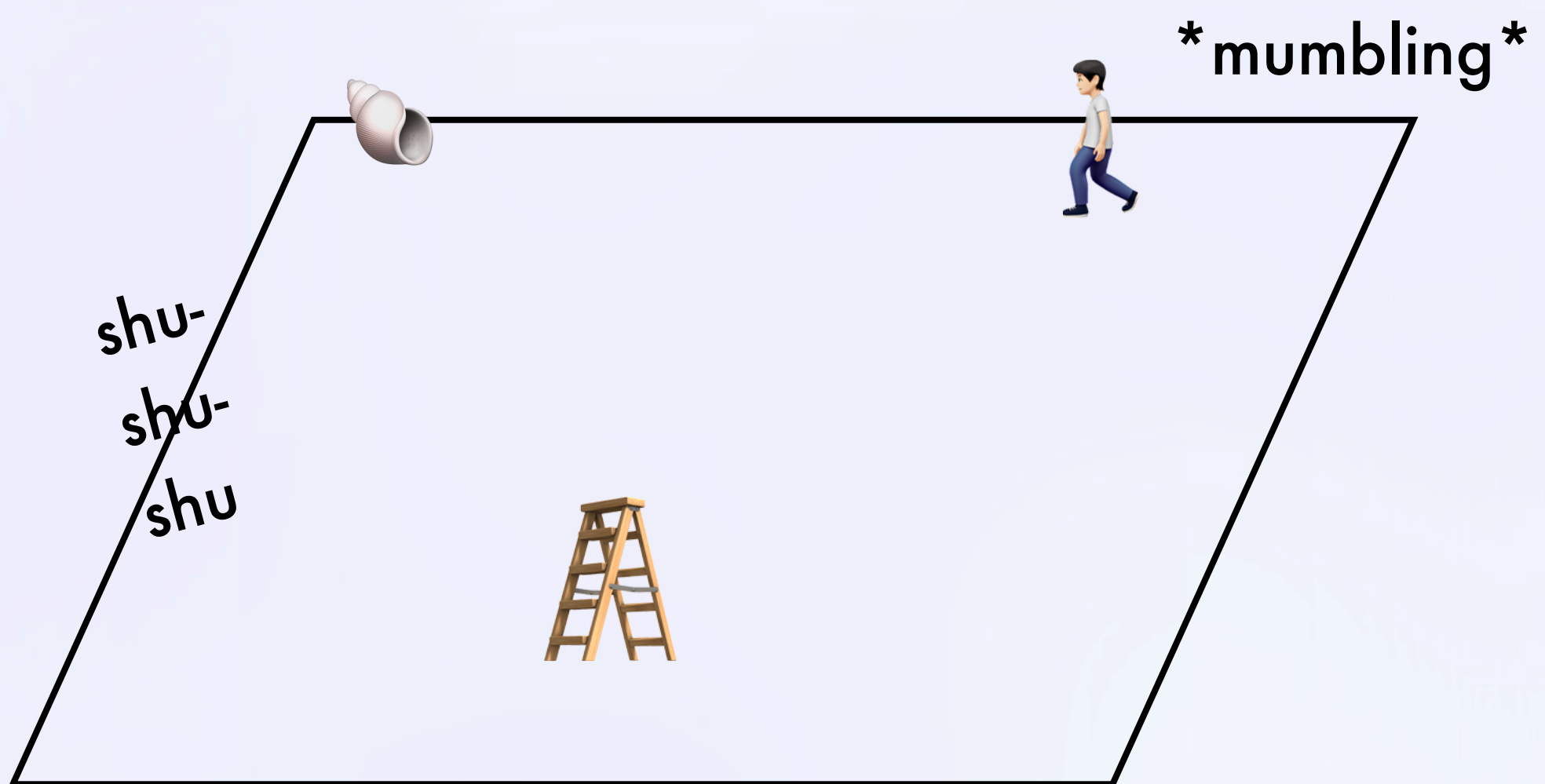
“According to the logic of representation, something always represents something else, a truth that surface appearance leaves to be discovered. I would characterize this, somewhat counter-intuitively, as the logic of identity, in which it is never about you but about something else - a who that you are. In the logic of representation, you are valued not simply as you but as the who that you are. This leads to a hierarchy of whos in which one who is more valuable than another, it leads to a market of identities...The logic of presentation, by contrast, does not assume that a truth needs to be uncovered behind the surface of appearances: the vertical relation of representation is instead collapsed into presentation's horizontality. Surface appearance coincides with truth, thus doing away with this distinction altogether.”

What de Boever calls “the logic of representation”, in which “you are valued not simply as *you* but as the *who* that you are”, sounds like a very intangible idea, but it does have real world implications. Who do we expect to reveal their identity? Whose bodies do we accept as abstract? If I would make a performance, that starts from me stepping on the stage with my middle-age able white male body, the act wouldn't be instantly read, (by most audience members, at least without any separate encouragement), as being about my whiteness or maleness or ability.

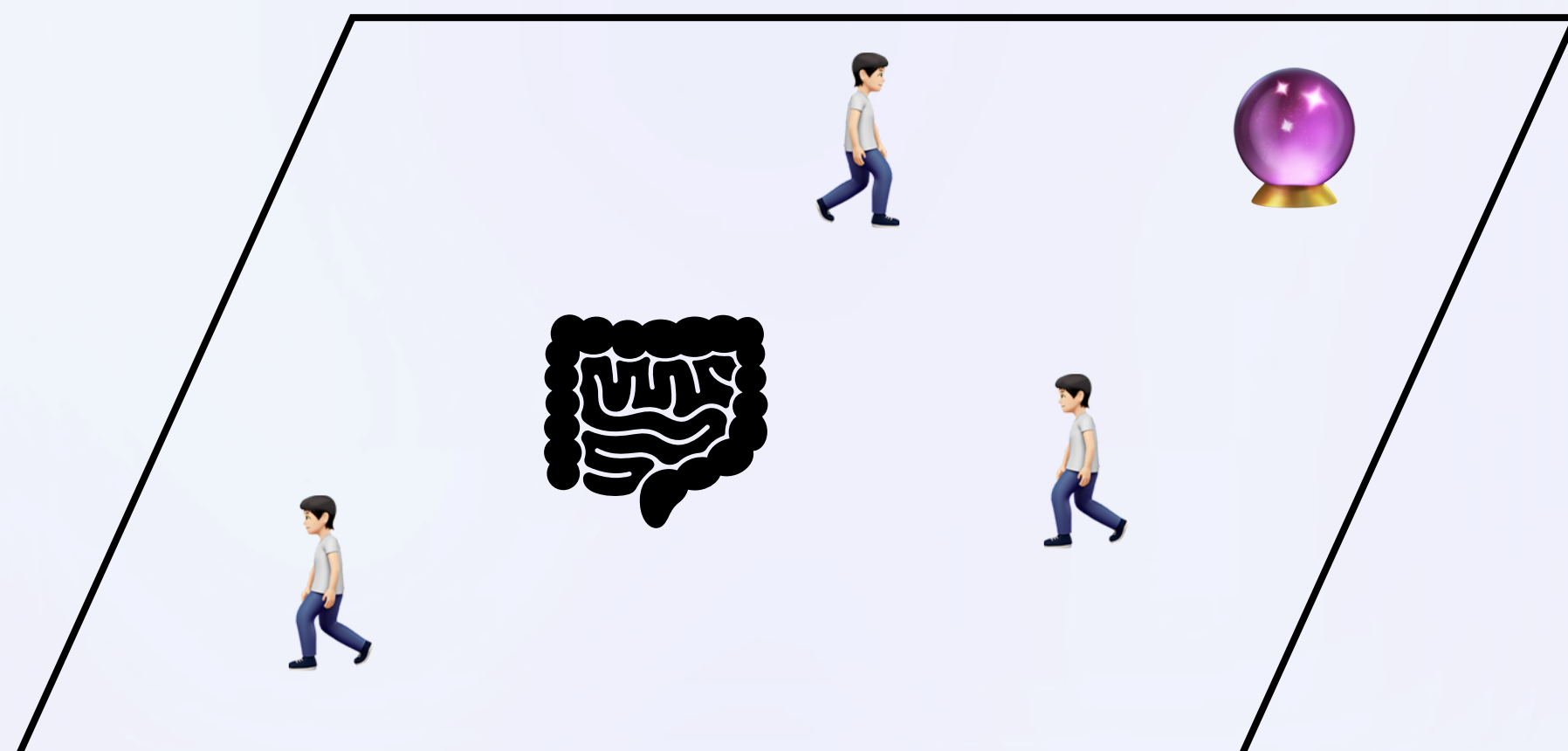
Instead, my body would have far easier access to what de Boever calls presentation's horizontality, which I understand as the default mode how the contemporary stage deals with its objects, including bodies. My body becomes, what de Boever calls "part of an anarchist, horizontal distribution of *yous* that are all *equal*, though not the *same*."

The way I understand 'presentation's horizontality' doesn't necessarily mean abstraction or absence of meaning, but the ability to negotiate new meanings through coexistence and challenging of pre-existing, fixed identities. Because I lack the words to express this properly, and I'm sure that many of you would recognise this mode of being if they saw it in a performance, I'm gonna try to draw it:

my performance:



looped singing



4.4 time, contemporaneity, coexistence

While the word 'theatre' refers both to the art form and the physical place / institutional context where it is performed, the word 'dance' does not, without contextualisation, suggest an audience. While you might sometimes hear the words 'concert dance' and 'art dance' being used to refer to the artistic production of dance on theatrical stages, those terms feel a bit clumsy and technical compared to the much more familiar 'contemporary dance'. In order to fully exist as art, dance almost needs to be (labeled) contemporary.

As argued before, it is obvious that the word 'contemporary' in contemporary dance can't be understood only as a proxy for 'art-', but also as a way to distinguish it from previous periods of dance, such as modern and classical. Contemporary is also a convenient marketing term, that implies identifiability and relevance to a contemporary audience, whose ability to be contemporary themselves can simultaneously be challenged.*

In both theatre and dance, the 'contemporary' could be used as a way to cut ties with the previous aesthetic and ideology in more fundamental ways, or simply as a way of talking about the contemporaneity of objects, music, words and themes that are 'of our time'. In other words, 'contemporaneity' could just as well be an attribute of the form or the content.

* In the late 2010's, Zodiak, the main venue for contemporary dance in Helsinki, used "Are you contemporary enough?" as their marketing slogan. This seemingly casual question can be intentionally misinterpreted and broken down in multiple ways. Is contemporaneity quantifiable? Is there a level of contemporaneity that is enough? Is it possible to be too contemporary, or if this would happen, would one simply be ahead of their time? Should the audience rise to the level of contemporaneity of the art or the other way around?

Another possibility comes from Frédéric Pouillaude, who suggest that contemporaneity can be taken quite literally:

“In its broader meaning and without indicating any epoch, ‘contemporary’ is all that coexists, all that belongs to a particular time. No need to base this coexistence on a sharing of features and identities, on some form of substantial community. The things, the people, the events coexist”*

**Frédéric Pouillaude:
Scène and contemporaneity*

If Pouillaude's statement was true, it would mean that everything would be contemporary as a default and that there would be no outside to contemporaneity. Why is it then, that contemporary seems to align with choreography more comfortably than with the theatre?

Surprisingly, the answer can be found from not what theatre has less, but from what it has more. Theatre has at least three features, that enrich its ability to manipulate time but which might also undermine its capability to make time experienceable as coexistence.

- ability to illustrate an epochal time (it is night, it is the 17th century)
- ability to move in fictional time (a play of two hours might depict a fictional time of two months or two centuries, the fictional time does not correspond with the experienced time)
- theatre's relation to a pre-written text aligns it with any other type of story. Even if the play unfolds to us in real time, it could be understood as a response to the question "what happened?" rather than "what happens?". This might be due to the concept of "plot", which implies that the most interesting available storyline has been curated in advance from an unorganised soup of events, rather than letting the events themselves unfold in front of the audience.

While materiality and representativity are not zero-sum properties of an object, it seems to matter which one takes the upper hand in the construction of the temporality of an artwork. If a lot of representational tools are applied to the flow of time, it becomes less experienceable as duration. On the other hand, a very precise, explicit use of fictional time, such as a performer declaring that “it is night”, wouldn’t necessarily change the overall temporality of the performance as a whole.

Sometimes the use of pre-recorded music can have a similar effect. Even if we don't know the music beforehand, we have a dramaturgical understanding of how a piece of music might go. The music (that coincidentally, in its digital form, consists of tracks) creates a kind of track, on which the audience member is transported towards an inevitable and premeditated outcome, without having (even a very theoretical) possibility to turn left or right. One should be cautious of using music with a "direction" unless direction is exactly what is needed.

Ontologically, to be contemporary is to simply to coexist in time without the need to share “features and identities” with other contemporary objects.

Not needing to share features and identities to co-exist with others sounds like a pretty tangible goal for making more inclusive performances.

The way we understand things (ontologically), affects what is possible (politically).

4.5 Materiality, representativity, labor

"And thereby the public was shown: Look, your picture frame ruptures time; the tiniest authentic fragment of daily life says more than painting. Just as the bloody fingerprint of a murderer on the page of a book says more than the text."

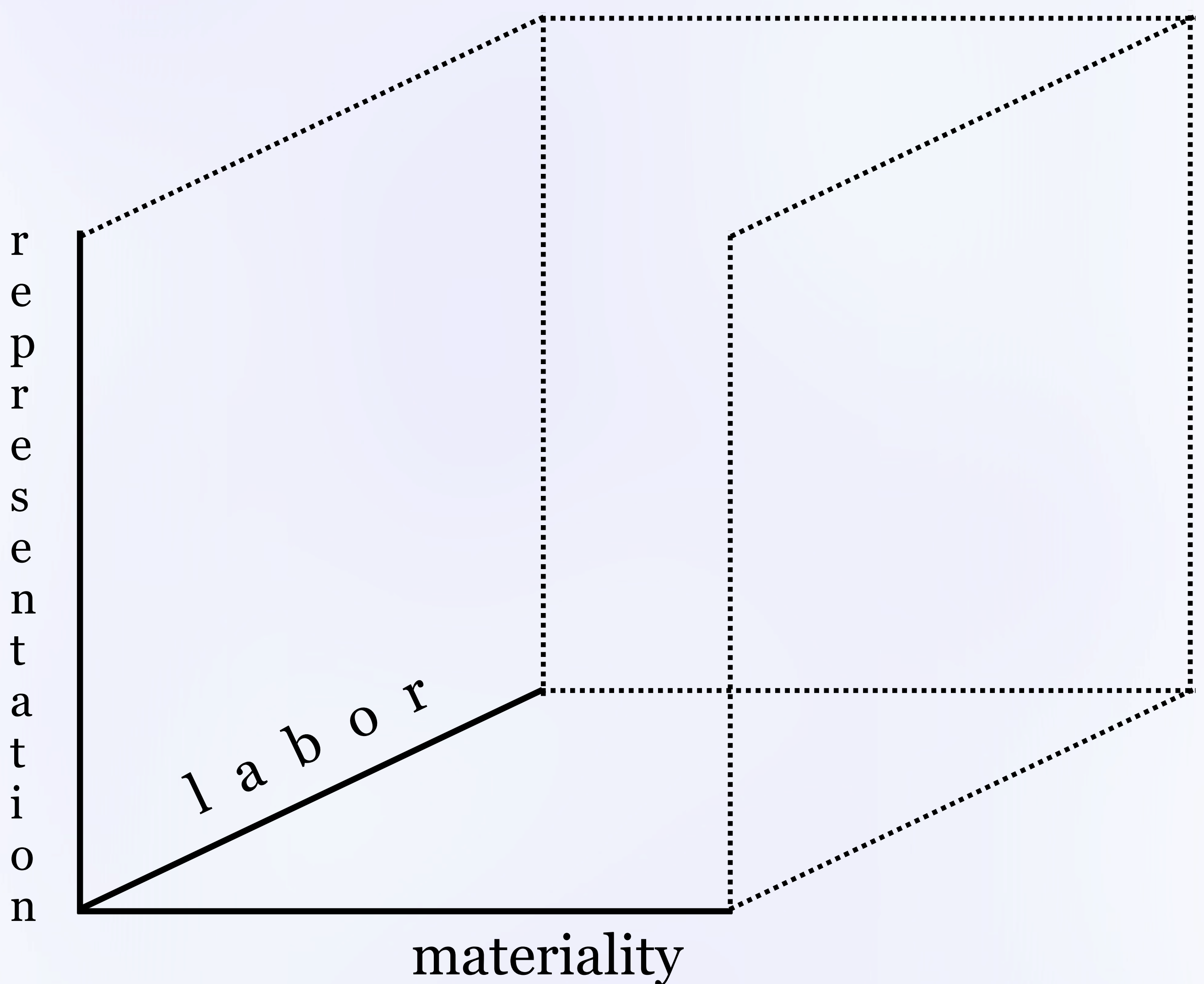
- Walter Benjamin: Author as a producer

We have broken down stage objects as having both material and representative properties. While we have discussed the differences as well as entanglements of these properties, it is important to remember that both the objects materiality (what it is) and its representativity (what it stands for) are available to us through the faculty of our senses. These qualities determine what an object can be and do aesthetically, and in many work situations, this is enough.

A third category is needed to describe properties that are not perceivable but are nonetheless very real. The human struggle behind a beautiful soul ballad or the vast amounts of natural resources spent on set design are equally parts of what the object is, even if we would decide to assign them outside of its "artobjecthood". In the words of Sara Ahmed:

“Objects take the shape of this history; objects "have value" and they take shape through labor. They are formed out of labor, but they also "take the form" of that labor”

If we think of the material properties of an object as belonging to its “choreographic” way of being, and its representational properties as belonging to its “theatrical” way of being, we can see that the labour through which objects take their shape does not automatically fit into either.



While this third category didn't just appear out of nowhere in the mid 2010's, many recent cultural crises such as climate change, #metoo and various cases involving cultural appropriation or who can play who, have highlighted the fact that new tools are needed to deal with this additional dimension, not least because the questions it proposes have been traditionally placed outside of art making.

Labor can obviously be turned from an invisible, knowable property of an object into a representative one. For example, you could just tell the audience how something was made.

A perhaps more poetic way of looking at this is that, if you think about Nina Simone's or Kurt Cobain's singing, the 3rd dimension shines through both the meaning of the lyrics and the materiality of the voice. We don't need to read the artists's autobiographies to feel and appreciate the human condition "behind" the voice, because the condition becomes experienceable in the voice.

Materiality

"real" and visible

(default mode of "choreography")

(object is what it is)

Representativity

"unreal" but visible

(default mode of "theatre")

(object stands for something other than it is)

Labour

real but invisible

(object is the result of its own conditions)

chapter 5:

tips

& tricks

& incoherent

rants

The following part is loose compilation of tools that have emerged during the making of performances. Most of them deal with finding structure and patterns in the performance material.

5.1 the contemporary theatre field matrix

We discovered "The contemporary theatre field matrix" during the making of Saara Turunen's Phantom of Normality (Tavallisuuden Aave) in 2016. The matrix works especially well for theatre and theatrical dance performances that are built from individual, loosely connected scenes.

The basic idea of the matrix is very simple. A performance is divided into four scene types depending on their performative depth and materiality. These four scene types are called:

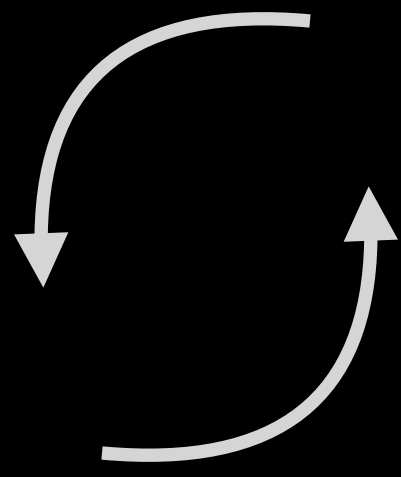
"classical theatre"

"contemporary theatre"

"showcase"

and

"dream sequence"



transparency, shared time / space with the audience

“contemporary theatre”

“showcase”

realism, signifiers,
story, content

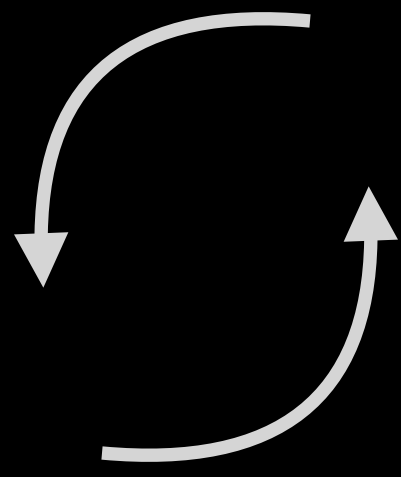
contemporary
theatre
field
matrix

abstraction, affect,
vibe, materiality

“classical theatre”

“dream sequence”

illusion, opacity, make-belief, fictional time / space



This type of structuring can be used as a method for finding sameness in an otherwise unconnected pile of material. Say, you're a lighting designer and you're working on a performance that is divided into 20 different scenes. Instead of trying to "solve" 20 individual scenes with 20 different lighting ideas, you might find that your scenes

3

7

11

18

actually all belong in the category of "dream sequence" and scenes

2

4

5

15

belong in "contemporary theatre" and so forth. In theory, you could then focus on designing four really nice and thoughtful lighting states / concepts / ideas / gestures to correspond with the four categories, and just keep rotating between them throughout the performance.

Of course, the way you choose to divide the performance into scenes doesn't have to correspond with how it is done collectively in the group.

One might also find out that there are two distinctly different types of "showcase" -scenes in the performance which both deserve to be individually thought.

Either way, I have found out that this method, in all its simplicity, can be used to find structure and patterns in an otherwise daunting, unorganised pile of scenes.

5.2 fluids

Fluids is a method, or perhaps as it is presented here, an expansion to a performance maker's vocabulary. It was introduced to me by the choreographer Nicole Beutler, who in turn had developed it from the ideas of artist and researcher Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen.

Beutler uses the idea of different bodily fluids as starting points for creating movement. An arterial fluid, for example, would imply a vigorous and outward energy, and a lymph fluid could be used to describe the stoic clarity of a person giving a ted talk. When we were working together on the Norrdans production "Our house is on fire" in 2020, it turned out that these fluids were equally useful for describing the energies and qualities of design elements, such as light, video and sound.

The following list is my interpretation of how the fluids could be used in the stage design context.

Arterial flow: explosive energy from in to out, releasing energy with a clear direction, mass, viscerality, oomph, dionysian

Venous flow: collecting and building up energy, slow crescendo, drone, weaving

Capillary flow: questioning the temporality of the performance, who's in charge?, multiple possible directions, river delta, ambivalence

Lymph flow: directness, awareness, specificity, clarity, contemporaneity, lack of drama, apollonian

Synovial flow: spiralling, letting go, wild

Cellular flow: readiness to receive, awakeness, 360-ness

Intercellular flow: just do it, stream of consciousness, fast and energetic but not weighty

Fluids can be used to describe the main energetical / dramaturgical tuning of a scene. A very **arterial** beginning might make the audience lean toward the performance in excitement, and a **cellular** beginning might suggest a more contemplative and delicate attitude towards the performance. This also affects the genre, or micro-genre of the performance: entertainment in general plays a lot with the arterial, while much of somatic-adjacent contemporary dance is perhaps more aligned with the cellular.

What I personally like about the fluids, is that they allow me to see energy not as one thing, but as something that circulates, spreads outward and flows inward like the fluids of the body.

Fluids are also useful for distinguishing the different elements of the performance from each other. Sometimes a scene might benefit from performers, sound and light working within the same fluid, but sometimes it might make sense to balance a slippery and omnidirectional, **intercellular** piece of movement with a **venous** piece of sound design that has a feeling of accumulation and direction.

5.3 Meat and potatoes

Meat and potatoes is a method that works especially for lighting design, but it could also be used in any other design practice where limited resources dictate what is artistically possible.

The basic idea is as follows: The performance is designed around “the meat”, or protein, that either aesthetically defines the work and / or acts as its energetical high point. The protein is the things that requires the most resources, such as money (to buy or rent new equipment), or time (for set up and programming).

“The potatoes”, or carbohydrates, are then chosen to compliment the protein. Like potatoes, their purpose is to create a sensation of fullness and something for the protein to lean into. In lighting, the potatoes is what fills the space with light and removes darkness in a same way that potatoes remove hunger.

“A garnish” is then chosen to complement the combination of meat and potatoes, perhaps by adding a little acidic “zing” or a refreshing “crunch”. The garnish is there to brighten, provide a new texture, and to simultaneously tie together and separate the main ingredients.

5.3 Jazzy chords

Jazzy chords is a variation of meat and potatoes, explained through a different metaphor. In this method, the design is built around the potatoes, or a base note, meaning the main, “basic” lighting state of the performance.

When the base note is complemented with a new note, a number of things can happen:

**It can set the mood
(minor or major 3rd)**

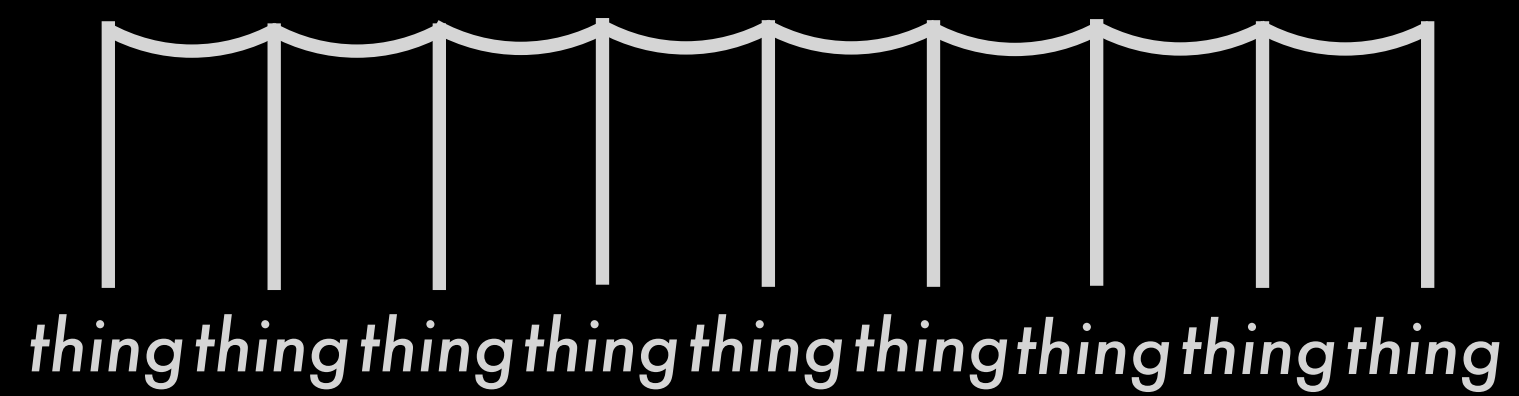
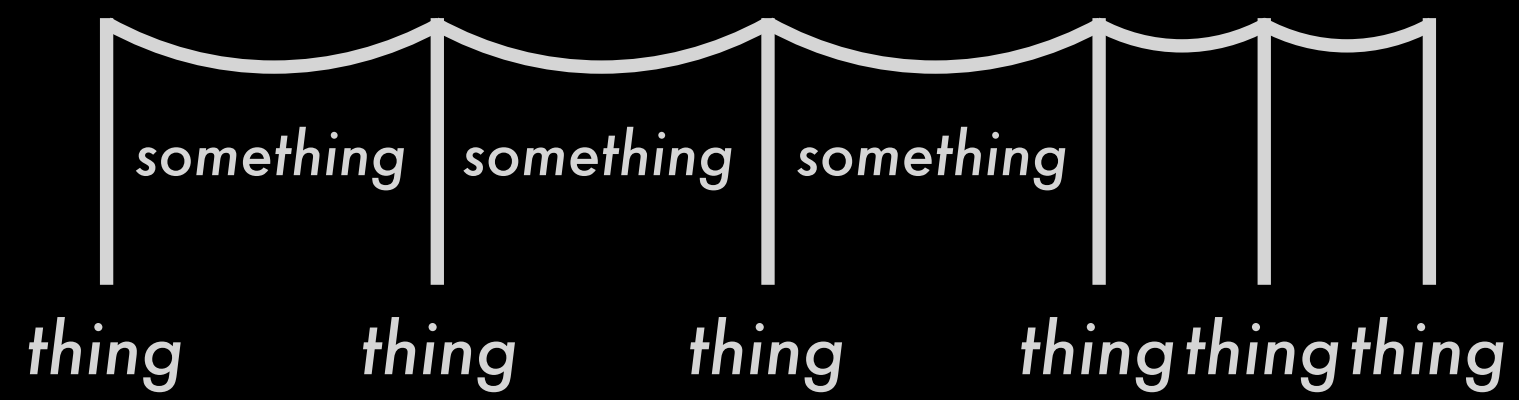
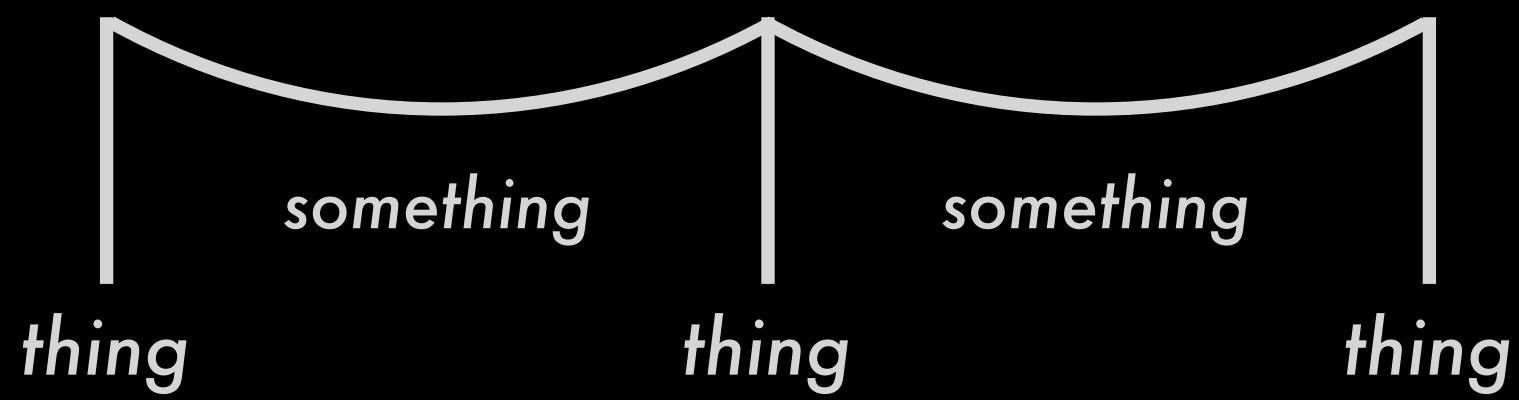
**It can introduce an open question
(major 2nd or 4th)**

**It can introduce an unresolved conflict
(minor 2nd or minor 5th)**

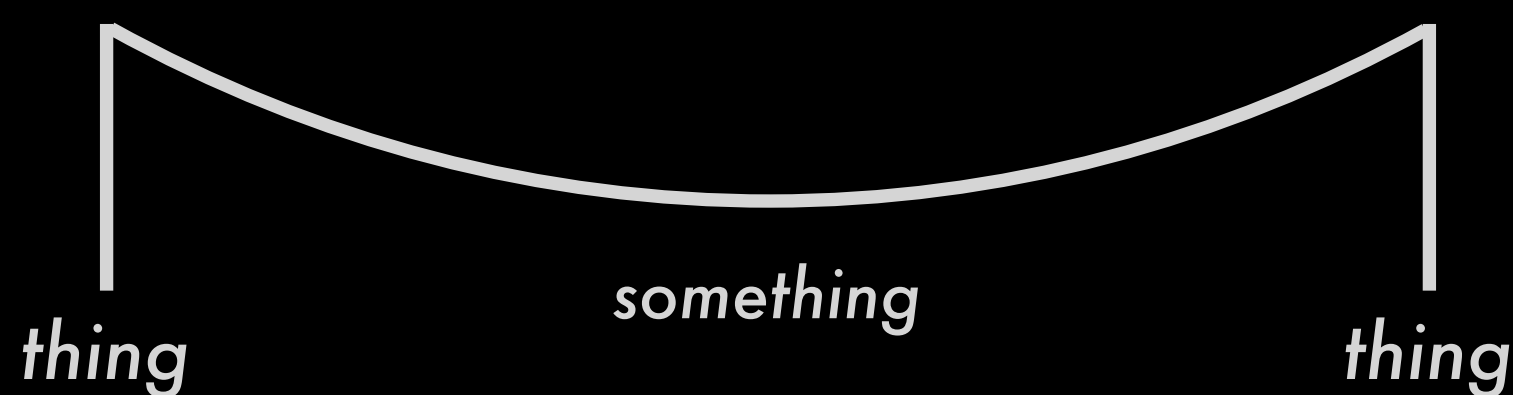
**It can fortify the base note and keep the door open for more notes to emerge
(open 5th)**

The more notes you introduce to the chord, the more jazzy it becomes. Like in music, the base note can always change. What used to be a mood-setter or the dissonant part of a conflict, can become the base against which everything else is measured.

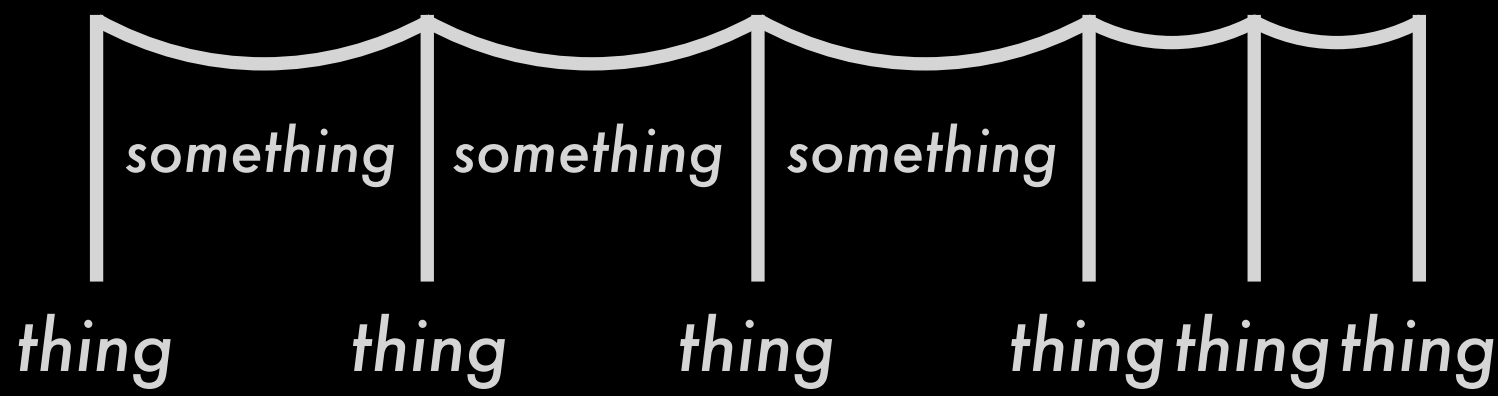
5.4 Suspension bridge



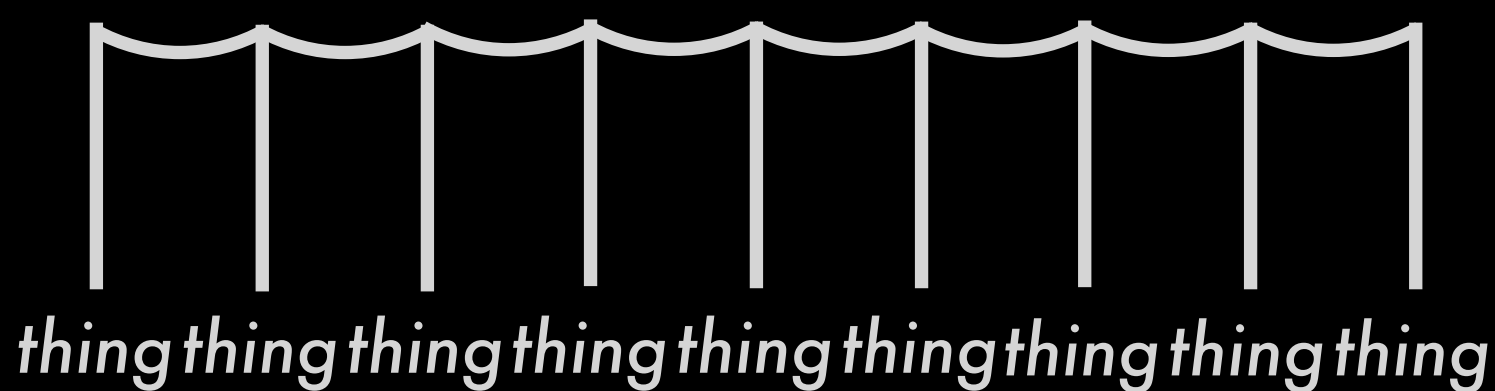
"Suspension bridge" is a method designed for work situations where there is no time for a more holistic approach. The method, or metaphor goes as follows: a suspension bridge is made of rope and pieces of wood, but you can walk on it because it is supported by two solid things:



What constitutes a thing in a performance, is that it is a scene, a piece of music, a lighting state or just a single gesture that feels like its own "thing". A thing is something that feels like it belongs and makes you lean in towards the performance. Between things, there's just something.



The aim is to find more and more things that “work”, without worrying too much how they are connected. If we’re lucky, we’re going to have such a dense network of “things”, that the performance doesn’t feel like “something” at all. Instead, it flows relentlessly forward like an Alex the Frog song.



This doesn't mean that the performance needs to appear dense or super eventful to its audience. A thing doesn't have to be visible to the outside, or perhaps even noticeable for those on the inside, any more than we notice the surface on which we walk on. The thing is what gives us the feeling of understanding what we are doing and a sense of place and relationality with where we are going.

5.5 Adhocracy

from latin ad hoc, meaning "for the particular end or case at hand without consideration of wider application" (merriam webster)

I promised tips, tricks and incoherent rants. This belongs to the latter category.

Every performance can be thought of as having some kind of structure. Sometimes this structure is very carefully considered during the making of the performance, while sometimes a structure can be only found out afterwards. A performance can be structured in an endless number of ways, some of which are introduced in this book.

Structures create boundaries and boundaries limit what is possible. While working without limitations does sound like something to strive for, it can also lead to a state that I like to call adhocracy.

Adhocracy is a situation, where (collective) decision making ceases to be based on a (collectively) chosen structure, aesthetic, concept or values. While this sounds dramatic, these situations are often quite mundane: a performer appears in an unexpected corner of the stage and you just quickly focus a moving light there to make them visible. As a result, the angle from which the light is coming from completely messes up the architectural rhythm of the 3-dimensional space that you've been building for weeks. The particularity, the poetic feeling of being in the presence of art, is lost (until of course, it's found again).

Ad hoc gestures are often functional: you sacrifice the intricacy of what you're doing for a greater good. Most performances can take a bit of ad hoc decision making, but at worst, adhocracy quietly erodes the logic, idea or personality of the artwork to the point where it ceases to be its own thing. Adhocracy turns specific thingness into generic something.

Adhocracy shouldn't be confused with the intentional breaking of one's own rules, concept or structure. Nor does it mean that a performance couldn't have multiple overlapping, unidentified and self-contradictory sets of rules and structures.

5.6 ENERGY

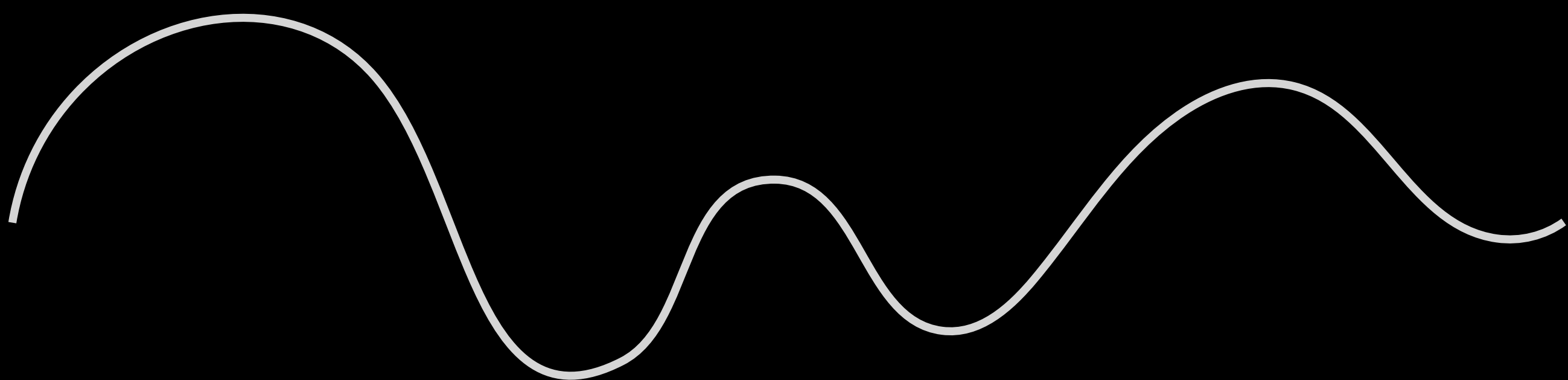
We often talk about energy in the stage context without having a mutual understanding of what it means. I would like to propose a definition that is derived from 8th grade physics.

Let's begin by dividing the whole concept of energy in two: potential and kinetic energy.

For our purposes, we could say that potential energy is something that an object has “earned”. According to justenergy.com, “potential energy is the stored energy in any object or system by virtue of its position or arrangement of parts”. In order to load an object with potential energy, one would then have to manipulate its position or arrangements. In artistic parlance, this is often called **composition.**

When we talk about a ‘energy’ in the stage context, we often talk mostly about its other half, the kinetic energy. According to the previously mentioned website, “kinetic energy is the energy of an object or a system's particles in motion.” Kinetic energy is what happens when we “spend” the potential energy that we have acquired. If a performance spends more energy than it is able to create, it risks losing its tension. This is important, because performances need some sort of tension to resonate, just like the strings of a guitar need to be tuned into a tension to produce a sound.

Performances create potential energy by tuning the relationships between the audience, the stage and its objects, and the space where it is performed. A historical theatre with a thousand seats has a stronger tuning than a small black box. Each person, as well as the ghosts of the theatre, bring a tension of their own.



I like to think of the tempo and “energy levels” of a performance in percentages. What I would do, is that I would break down the performance into scenes, give each scene an "energy-level percentage", and then avoid putting scenes with nearby percentages too close to each other, unless there is an intentional build-up or cool-down in how the scenes are sequenced. If I'm working in a position where I'm not expected to weigh in the order of scenes, which is obviously often the case when working with pre-written text, I would apply the same idea to lighting. This would mean making sure that the energetical high points of the lighting-dramaturgy are not too close to each other, and that low and medium energy parts don't blend into an indistinguishable mush. If two adjacent scenes are a like a 30% and 40%, I might try to nudge them into a 20% and 50%, a much less muddy proposition.

**this
couldn't
have
been
an
e mail**

5.7

Different artforms are good at different things. For example, TV-series are great because the emotional investment the viewer puts into their characters; after spending 40 (real) hours with Shiv Roy or Tony Soprano, just a simple facial expression or a single word they utter can feel monumental. TV obviously has a lot of other things working in its favor: it can move freely in scale by cutting from a serene helicopter shot of New York into a close-up of a bewildered face of an actor. It is also less and less bound to a set structure, as shows such as Atlanta are increasingly experimenting with both longer, cinematic episodes and conceptual, speculative episodes outside the continuum of the main plot. On top of this, TV shows have access to resources and are easily distributed worldwide.

So what are the particular strengths of live performance and the contemporary stage?

- Performances can produce psychologically nuanced, relatable characters like TV, cinema or literary fiction.**
- Performances can be built around visual and spatial concepts like installation art.**
- Performances can be used to entertain the audience like a pop concert.**
- Performances can be used to address a topic like non-fiction writing or journalism.**

What gives a performance its particular life force though, is obviously its liveness. A video recording of a performance can be used to distribute it to (often professional) audiences that might want to know what the work is like, and sometimes a recording can even become an artwork in its own right. Still, a recording of a performance can never fully capture what it is ultimately as a live experience.

In one way, liveness is simply a default feature of the performance - the audience comes in the theatre and the performance becomes 'live' without any extra effort. At the same time, the "liveness" of a performance can be broken down to smaller components which can be individually designed.

Earlier in this book, I proposed that design deals with meaning, materiality, space and time. Coincidentally, the "liveness" of a performance can be found from the same four properties.

Space

A performance is never just direct interplay between the performance-object and its audience. Instead, it resonates and grows into itself in the architecture in which it is presented. The space is what ultimately gives the performance its body, a shared acoustic, kinesthetic and sensory reality inside of which the performance-object and its audience meet.

All performances have an architecture of their own, as do all the places, such as the theatre, the internet or the forest, where they are performed. Sometimes the architectural proposal of the space and the architectural proposal of the performance coincide. This is one of the best feelings.

Time

Performances unfold in real time. A performance, even if its completely fixed to a pre-choreographed timeline, has the potentiality to unfold differently. Which it does each time.

Some performances are intact, they don't need much from the audience to unfold. Some performances, where time and duration themselves are subjects of inquiry, need audience to participate in this negotiation. Standing on an empty stage without an audience doesn't feel like much, but in front of a hundred people, it has tension.

Music often has dramaturgy and structure that give the audience some clues about how things are about to unfold. This is obviously super powerful, but also something to be aware of. Sometimes the best drama is no drama, the sheer indeterminacy of how a performance might unfold. Silence is a powerful way of saying that how the performance unfolds is up for debate, and that it might require a new mode of engagement from its audience.

Materiality

Performances are sensory experiences, in which we do not only hear sounds or see lights, but we can experience these things in their materiality. In a live setting, sound is never just sound. It is pressure, direction and mass. We hear it, but we also feel it in our bodies - perhaps as a pleasant tremor in the hair inside your nostril. Smoke from the smoke machine first makes the light beam visible, and soon we're engulfed in the light's viscosity. The light becomes stronger - not only brighter but also hotter - before it quickly fades into darkness. In the darkness, we navigate the world with our acoustic sense of space and with touch.

Meaning

Performances deal with pre-existing meanings, but they are also places where new meanings are negotiated. A live performance situation forms a temporary community - a micro version of the 'artworld' - in front of which new proposals are brought into inspection. Sometimes it is easy to see what proposals are accepted as legitimate: the audience laughs nervously at a thinly veiled institutional critique and bursts into spontaneous applause after a virtuotic dance solo.

The audience member is not only a witness to the performance itself, but also a witness to all the other audience members witnessing the performance. They see how someone is leaning in towards the performance, while the other crosses their arms as if they're trying to physically block new meanings from entering their body. What the performance is trying to communicate is either absorbed in or reflected off the bodies of its audience.

5.8 VERBS

'Verbs' is a method that I use when trying to map out some possible starting points for a new performance. The idea is to simply look whatever subject matter is already available, such as themes or topics, not in terms of how they could be represented, but in terms of what they can do.

Say that you are making a theatre production that is based on the game of roulette, or a piece of contemporary dance that uses vampire as an analogy for the contemporary capitalism*. You cannot lighting design a game of roulette, but lighting design can spin, circulate and evoke a sensation of inevitability. You cannot lighting design a vampire, but lighting design can seduce or suck the life out of its subject.

This method is a good way of translating the subject matter of a performance into a material form. The subject matter 'vampire' does not have to appear in a recognisable form, at least everywhere all the time. Instead, light, sound and other design practices can use the verbs to find their own material ways of working with the subject matter.

* references to Jussi Sorjanen's *Roulettenburg* and Sonya Lindfors's *One Drop* respectively

5.9 timing

"Time is the most precious ingredient"

- Rummo pasta commercial

The technology of lighting design (and to some extent, sound design) manages time by dividing it into frozen states and transitions between those states. A state is turned into another by "triggering a cue", which is most often done by pressing a button. I often trust my desire to press a button when trying to figure out when things need to end and begin.

Transitions between scenes are divided into cuts and fades, which can be further divided into the following subcategories

"turn of the page" a non-illusory, 3-5 second fade between two scenes

"hard cut" a non-illusory hard cut between scenes

"motivated fade" - length corresponds with other element (musical crescendo, slow opening of a door, the time that it takes to lift a set piece)

"motivated cut" - timing corresponds with other element (musical single hit, slamming of a door)

"frog in a pan" - a fade so slow that the audience doesn't realise it until its already happened

The design of time, or timing, does not require technology to happen. What the technology does is that it encourages other elements to form relations with a somewhat shared timeline through repetition.

5.10 DARKNESS & SILENCE

A writer starts to type on a blank white page.

A painter starts to paint on an empty white canvas.

A sculptor has a block of clay. One could say that the sculpture is already there, they just need to chisel out what doesn't belong.

That is obviously not true.

A lighting designer works at the theatre but there is already enough light. The designer turns the light off and then makes a light of their own.

A costume designer designs costumes, but everyone's already wearing something.

Jonathan Burrows writes: "Silence is no more neutral than nudity". Maybe so, but it is more difficult to achieve. All theatres hum.

hum



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