

The *vita perfumativa* and post-dramatic, post-conceptual personae

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The *vita perfumativa* or perfumative life operates at the intersection of the *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*, a classical opposition overturned after the horrors of the Holocaust in an attempt to bring philosophy to bear on the problems of contemporary life. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt famously advocated for the *vita activa*, challenging the contemplative life of the mind handed down by Platonism, with its priority of theory over practice, eternal truths over the realm of human actions.¹ As importantly, Arendt *practiced* her *vita activa*, putting her philosophy to work on problems of her time. Similarly, with *A New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (1958), Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca effectively countered the *vita contemplativa* of analytic and existential philosophies with the *vita activa* of rhetoric.² Translated into English in 1968, *A New Rhetoric* is among the most influential 20th-century works on argumentation, advocating a “regressive” philosophy based in the *doxa* of audiences rather than the *episteme* of experts. It is also a foundational text in the US field of composition and rhetoric. Arendt and Perelman, both Jewish

¹ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

² See David Frank and Michelle Bolduc, “From *vita contemplativa* to *vita activa*: Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's Rhetorical Turn.” *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* (Vol. 7), Ed. Robert N. Gaines. Pg. 65-86.

German exiles, one to America, the other to Belgium, and the Belgian scholar Olbrechts-Tyteca helped to reorient Western Cold War universities in the 1960s and 1970s and laid the groundwork for practicing the *vita perfumativa*, a practice I will introduce using two contrasting perspectives.

Engaging Arendt's concept of the *vita activa*, Serbian performance theorist Ana Vujanović has questioned the politicality or political efficacy often attributed to contemporary performing arts such as theater and performance art, particularly their ability to model or generate emergent modes of political subjectivity counter to neoliberal capitalist society. Vujanović affirms that such moments of politicality are indeed possible for the performing arts but insists they are historically very rare. She calls these brief moments "*vita performactiva*," provocatively punning together "activa" and "performative."

... we may observe that at some relatively few and brief but for the Western civilisation key moments, such as democratic Athens in the fifth and fourth century BC and the 18th century, when modern bourgeois society was constituted, the performing arts served as a public forum for debating political issues. At those moments, public/political practice and artistic performance constituted the continuum of civil life, whereby that hybrid practice, which I would call *vita performactiva*, was dialectically realised, but without any antagonism or binarism whatsoever. Namely, in those contexts, artistic performance and theatre in particular constituted an important social practice, not because in some specific cases it thematised current political issues, but because it performed the structural social role of providing models of acting and behaving in public and of testing hypothetical subjectifications and social relations.³

Vujanović offers several reasons explaining why contemporary performing arts cannot create such a continuum of civil life and thereby practice the *vita performactiva* today. She argues that the social

³ See Ana Vujanović, "Vita Performactiva: On the Stage of Neoliberal Capitalist Democratic Society," <http://www.anavujanovic.info/2012/#!/2012/01/vita-performactiva-on-the-stage-of-neoliberal-capitalist-democratic-society/>

role of theater and other performing arts has been displaced by media—by film, television, and the internet. Further, contemporary arts unfold not in relation to the direct democracy of ancient Athens but only representative forms of democracy in societies where aesthetics imbue all of politics. Finally, both the contemporary art world and that of critical theory are themselves embedded in neoliberal capitalist markets that effectively co-opt performative resistance as part of their incessant construction of normative subjectivity.

Vujanović thus advocates a certain modesty in claims for the politicality of performance, especially given the uncertainty of Benjamin's famous distinction between the aesthetization of politics and the politicalization of art. At the same time, she argues that the performing arts should target the contemporary crisis of representative democracy and "confront images of society as it presently is with those of a different, possible, and virtual one."⁴

While Vujanović defines her *vita performativa* as rare but critical moments of alignment between the performing arts and the *vita activa*, German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk aligns his notion of the *vita performativa* with the *vita contemplativa* while radically rethinking the latter. Indeed, in *You Must Change Your Life!*, Sloterdijk offers a wide-ranging genealogy of practice, exercise, and training, arguing that a general "anthropotechnics" of cultural life forms is key to surviving the deaths of God and Man and making sense of both "the return of religion" and our incipient posthumanism. He contrasts his *vita performativa* with Arendt's *vita activa* while also making it central to contemporary processes of subjectivation.

... all powers flow into the intensification of the practising subject, which progresses to ever higher levels of a purely performative mode of being in the course of the exercises. What was once called the *vita contemplativa* to contrast it with the *vita activa* is, in fact, a *vita performativa*. In its own way, it is as active as the most active life. This does not, however,

⁴ Vujanović.

express itself in the mode of political action that Hannah Arendt, following the trail of Aristotle, wanted to see at the forefront of active life forms, nor in that of work, production and economy, but rather in the sense of an assimilation by the never-tiring universal or divine being-nothing, which does and suffers more than any finite creature would be capable of doing or suffering. Like those creatures, however, it knows a form of self-enclosed, fulfilling, and indestructible calm that, going on the accounts of initiates, in no way resembles the profane calm of exhaustion.⁵

Sloterdijk's anthropotechnic project recasts global modernity as a series of radical experiments in re/activating the *vita contemplativa*, reorienting its target and direction, and expanding training exponentially. For him, the divine ecstatic experiences that Medieval monasteries patiently produced in select middle-aged men would, over the course of centuries, become experiences of secular enlightenment produced in young children by public schools at national scales. Secularization can be understood as a change in the orientation of exercise regimes, shifting from the verticality of the *vita contemplativa* (upward, cosmic, salvation) to the horizontality of *vita activa* (forward, earthly, progress), a conversion performed according to Sloterdijk not by Panoptic prisons or industrial factories but common school classrooms.

Today, a diagonal path/passion traces the *vita performativa*. Beyond general education, Sloterdijk's expansive anthropotechnics aligns the performative life of practice with professional and amateur sports, modern art, self-improvement programs, New Age spiritualisms, and a host of other contemporary life forms. "Since practice as an activity type—together with aesthetic play—stepped out of the shadow of work, a new ecosystem of activities has been developing in which the absolute precedence of product value is revised in favour of practice values, performance values,

⁵ Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life!* Tr. Wieland Hoban. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013. Pg. 212.

and experiential values.”⁶ Indeed, to be contemporary is, for Sloterdijk, to live—and die—in a performative dimension, a realm he explicitly distinguishes from work, labor, production:

No one can be a contemporary today, then, unless they sense how the performative dimension is overtaking the work dimension. Thus the sports system has developed into a multiverse with hundreds of secondary worlds, in which self-referential motion, useless play, superfluous exertion and simulated fights celebrate their existence somewhat willfully, in the clearest possible contrast to the utilitarian objectivism of the working world[....]⁷

We arrive here at the nexus of performativity, capital, and the production of subjectivity. While Herbert Marcuse and Jean-François Lyotard align performativity historically with capital and labor, both Vujanović and Sloterdijk develop their versions of the *vita performa(c)tiva* as critico-creative alternatives within or alongside capital. The question becomes: what to make of the useless play, superfluous exertion, and simulated flights of the *vita performa(c)tiva*, starting here and now with you and me and other companions of *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics*?

What if we were to make something of this useless play by making up a practice of the *vita perfumativa*? Recall that perfumance ~~is~~ the citational mist of any and all performances, performatives, and performativities, that which cannot be booked by presence, representation, concepts, history, or ontology. Perfumance, like Derridean differance, trace, and supplement, constitutes and ruins these logocentric ideas, as well as ideation itself. Perfumance ~~is~~ pharmakon, and the *vita perfumativa* pharmacological—the function of K becoming insistent in time.

The *vita perfumativa* entails *showing* and *telling* one’s story for others, autopoetically making up (modeling-building-trying-evaluating) one’s own story of alternating alterities by throwing one’s bits out there and being drawn back in, over and over, with others and other others

⁶ Sloterdijk, pg. 212.

⁷ Sloterdijk, pg. 212-213.

and no one at all. Between the eyes and ears, the *eidos* and *logos* of reason, there is perfumance. Recall that in making up perfumance, I once took up—and was taken by—a throwaway line in Jacques Derrida's "Ulysses Gramophone: Hearsay Yes in Joyce," a paper he could have "transformed into a treatise of perfumes, that is, of the *pharmakon*, and titled it 'On the Perfumative in Ulysses.'"⁸ Miming Odysseus through a series of itinerant anecdotes and theorizations, Derrida is there writing of the double affirmation, the *yes, yes*: "In sum, the *yes* would be transcendental adverbality, the ineffable supplement to all verbs: in the beginning was the adverb, *yes*, but as an interjection, still very close to a preconceptual vocalization, the perfume of discourse."⁹

Yes marks that there is an address to the other. This address is not necessarily a dialogue or an interlocution, since it supposes neither voice nor symmetry, but in advance the haste of a response that is already asking. For there is some other, thus if there is some *yes*, the other is no longer produced by the same or the ego. *Yes*, the condition of every signature and performative, addresses itself to some other, which it does not constitute, and it can only begin by *asking*, as a response to an always prior demand, to *ask* him or her to say *yes*. Time only appears from this singular anachrony.¹⁰

Through this strange loop of spacetime, that of the eternal return of difference, the *vita perfumativa* is not so much understood as undergone; *yes*, it's theorized and practiced involuntarily across different scales: performances and performatives, power-knowledge paradigms, onto-historical strata. Played out over such micro- and macro-scales, one follows and anticipates oneself differently, alternatively. Playfully perhaps, but only if we include dark play, dark ecology.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Ulysses Gramophone: Hearsay Yes in Joyce." Tr. François Raffoul. *Derrida and Joyce: Texts and Contexts*. Ed. Andrew J. Mitchell and Sam Slote. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013. Pg. 75.

⁹ Derrida, pg. 72-73.

¹⁰ Derrida, pg. 74.

Companions, how to live-die perfumatively? What is the existential function of one's training and practice? How does one queer a war machine that shapes us daily and is itself being reverse-engineered by global performative forces, social, economic, and ecological? Here lies, for me, the challenges of the *vita perfumativa*.

We can trace this existential function in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, where Deleuze and Guattari write that Kafka's writing machine mixes the memos, reports, and machinery of his insurance day job with personal letters, short stories, and intricate novels in order to diagram two institutional architectures: the ancient, Panoptic tower overseeing molar, segmented blocks of desire and an emerging molecular space composed of hallways, sliding doors, and secret passages. Though the characters K, Herr K, Joseph K, Klammer, etc., who navigate these spatial formations of discipline and control, Kafka's minor literature produces what Deleuze and Guattari call the "K function," which is less "a question of K as a general function taken up by an individual than of K as a *functioning of a polyvalent assemblage of which the individual is only a part*, the coming collectivity being another part, another piece of the machine—without our knowing what this assemblage will be."¹¹ K marks an intensity of desire carried across multiple thresholds, fluctuating from high to low through a series of becomings that operate between and beyond literature and life.

The K function helps us sense how affects and micro-performativities can, through sedimentations and foldings, self-organize into the performatives and performances of avant-garde bachelor machines, and how these machines can in turn connect and morph into collective assemblages of enunciation—paradigms—or again, from there to collective assemblages of desire, full blown revolutionary or reactionary desiring machines. From hiking clubs to the Green Party, it is a matter of connecting and intensifying across scales, adopting different geometries and rhythms along the way.

This is how one queers the war machine.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Tr. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. Pg. 58.

In the backend of *Perform or Else*, I sought to stage destratification or queering in a similar manner—signing on to a series of Challengers whose devised perfumance includes a shuttle and seven astronauts, a gay 19th-century vivisectionist, a sci-fi scientist who punctures the earth's skin, a magic realist reporter who finds 18th-century economists living on a jungle plateau, the famous converted British warship that launched oceanography, the challenging-forth decried by Heidegger, and a schizo-professor who becomes lobster before crawling into a particle clock.¹²

And what is it that carries *you* away?

Although I've never put things quite this way, Challenger—and especially its 8th or 9th iterative character, Dr. Kx4l3ndj3r—operates as McKenzie's K function. Through it, "I" had not only 'discovered' a matrix or *khora* of Challenger disastronauts, navigators of the cosmos: these *katastronauti* had found "my" K, placed it in their cargo bay, and begun been shuttling me and my research along for the ride. Posing as objects of study, they have become what I can only call post-dramatic, post-conceptual personae, complete with characters, sets, props, and casting calls. Dramatis personae are traditionally understood as dramatic characters listed in writing, though Hans-Thies Lehmann has given us another mode for thinking post-dramatic personae. Deleuze and Guattari introduced conceptual personae in *What is Philosophy?* in order to cast different figures or approaches to philosophizing which cannot be reduced to the philosopher in question.¹³ As Levi R. Bryant writes, "The subject of a philosophy is not the philosopher, but rather the conceptual persona. Indeed, the philosopher is often horrified by the conceptual persona that inhabits the philosophy she gropes towards and the becoming into which it draws her despite herself."¹⁴ As a mentor once taught me: First you are ignored, then you are rejected, then you are misunderstood and accepted.

¹² See Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*. London: Routledge, 2001. Parts II and III.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* Tr. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

¹⁴ See an insight discussion of conceptual personae, see Levi R. Bryant's blog, Larval Subjects: <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2014/09/17/conceptual-personae-philosopher-anti-philosopher-mysterian/>, accessed October 28, 2017.

For better and for worse, a series of challenging, post-dramatic, post-conceptual personae had beckoned me to perform long before I had realized it. K called, and I responded, involuntarily. And other research companions have as well.

In 2010 I was contacted by Ralo Mayer, an Austrian post-conceptual artist who has won recognition for his own investigations of disaster. Mayer mixes fact and fiction and calls his performative research project “How to Do Things with Worlds.”¹⁵ Significantly, he has taken up NASA *Challenger* as a vehicle for exploring the impact of 20th-century disasters on his generation—which includes us. The artist also has incorporated *Perform or Else* and disastronautics into his flight plans, and he is recognized for his work with science and science fiction, being awarded the 2012 Msgr. Otto Mauer Prize in Austria.

Ralo Mayer originally contacted me to compose a text for his first solo exhibition catalogue.¹⁶ I did so by mashing up the work of a character named RM, remixing the artist’s installation, literary, and media work with tracks from *Perform or Else*, as well as a reading of a warning drawn from Nietzsche that is particularly pertinent to the *vita perfumativa*: “Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is only a form of what is dead, and a very rare form.”¹⁷ Mayer and I have since collaborated on a performance lecture at PSi Stanford and a performance philosophy workshop at the Sorbonne. I cannot fully explain the extent of our collaboration though I sense that he too has answered the call of Kx4l3ndj3r.

Practice of the *vita perfumativa* mixes different performativities and in doing so remixes the human and non-human, the living and the inorganic, oneself and an other other. Spacetime constraints prevent me from sketching the implications for the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*.

The catalogue essay I composed for Ralo Mayer is titled “The Revelations of Dr. Kx4l3ndj3r.” Why revelations? My research suggests that, as a composition of intensities and affects, the *vita*

¹⁵ See Ralo Mayer’s site, <http://was-ist-multiplex.info/>, accessed October 30, 2017.

¹⁶ See Ralo Mayer, *Woran glauben ide Motten ween sie zu den Lictern streben/Obviously a Major Malfunction/KAGO KAGO KAGO BE*.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Tr. Josefine Nauckhoff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pg. 110.

perfumative is highly indexical, for it existentially registers the becoming actual of the virtual and the becoming real of the possible and does so through the medium of diverse bodies, materials, and networks. Given this idiosyncratic yet communal indexicality, the practice of the *vita perfumativa* entails ekstatic, revelatory experiences—experiments in which the dialogues of reason are immersed in the sounds and spectacles of a collective perfumance, where intimacy and detachment intermingle and we find ourselves open to the cosmos, which exposes itself via Kodachrome as kaosmosis.

A short time after writing Ralo's catalogue essay, I remediated "Revelations" into a 33-minute video essay and began showing and playing it loud at conferences, as the secret to theory is a good set of subwoofers. I also posted it on my website, labster8.net.

Then, in 2012, Bartek Frackowiak of the Polish theater group HOB0 Art Foundation contacted me about their plans to stage the seven Challengers of *Perform or Else* and "The Revelations of Dr. Kx4l3ndj3r" in their opera lecture *Katastronautci (Disastronauts)*, breaking these characters out of their siloed series, enabling them to mix and intermingle via the method of controlled aleatorism developed by Polish composer Witold Lutoslawski.¹⁸ As I subsequently learned, Mayer's "How to Do Things with Worlds" would also appear, as well as seven Theramins, behind which the seven performers at one point appeared to form seven Ks, only upside down and backwards. Having traveled to Warsaw in October, 2013, I watched and listened, understanding a little, undergoing a lot, for one lives-dies the *vita perfumativa* by signing on-off with alterity.

Fellow kompanions, I do not know which of us has written this text.¹⁹

¹⁸ See HOB0 Art Foundation blog, accessed October 31, 2017, <http://hoboartfoundation.blogspot.com/2013/10/katastronautci-ganczarczyk-frackowiak.html>, and HOB0 Art Foundation on Vimeo, accessed October 21, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/84401412>.

¹⁹ For K. Special thanks to Jorge Luis Borges and the other one, the one called "Borges."