

Towards a Still Theatre

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The Sage does not act, yet accomplishes everything.
The Sage is silent, yet everything is communicated.
The Sage remains still, yet goes everywhere. (1)

Lao Tse

“I do not know whether it be true that a static theatre is impossible. Indeed to me it seems to exist already.” (2) — In an implicit manner, Maeterlinck’s statement questions the ease and possibility of defining “a static theatre.” In addition, his comment marks out the difficulties that one may encounter in attempting to locate discrete parameters that constitute “stillness” within “a static theatre.” Artaud does not consider “cruelty” as merely sadistic demonstrations of violence, sanguineousness, or bestiality, since “cruelty” appeals to him as “a matter of neither sadism nor bloodshed.” (3) Similarly, the notion of “stillness” needs not systematically connote the idea of a physical body at re-pose, immobile and silent. Rather, it is akin to what Michael Kirby thinks of postmodern dance, “not pre-selected for its characteristics but result[ing] from certain decisions, goals, plans, schemes, rules, concepts, or problems.” (4)

The difficulty in defining “stillness” lies in its paradoxical existence: the view of stillness as an interior, its feel an exterior. Rodin’s *chef d’œuvre*, *The Thinker* is a paradigm. Inspired by Michelangelo, the athletic figure depicts more than a man in sober meditation: his muscles strained with tension and effort manifest a turbulent emotional struggle and a vigorous flow of consciousness.

Stillness as a means of manipulating time and space

Through the lens of time, stillness means a disruption in the normal flow of theatrical progression and a focus on the “present present.” Stillness allows time to expand exactly at a precise, present moment, such that audience can study each action on stage that will in turn become an event. Seeking to attain what Gertrude Stein calls “something to be made presently present,” (5) stillness necessitates an eradication of the pressure resulting from the audience “processing” performance in a linear fashion at a pre-determined rhythm. Proposing the notion of a “continuous present,” Stein insists that the audience remain in a moment-to-moment reality, an actuality that makes up daily existence. In her writing, she uses the technique of “beginning again and again” — disrupting the flow of a moment to return to the frame of mind that one possesses initially — to maintain a constant sense of a “continuous present.” The concept of a “continuous present” is central for theatre in Stein’s opinion because “the business of Art” is “to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present.” (6)

In this light, stillness becomes a sharp focus on process, connoting that how one perceives things is just as vital as what one perceives. Such an emphasis on the phenomenology of perception makes the body of a viewer more acutely aware of the happenings around it and at the same time more sensitive towards the phenomenological significance of familiar actions. Different theatre artists have innovated different creative means to put a halt in the normal flow of theatrical time: speeding it up, slowing it down, restricting or distending it... all of which culminate in expanding or condensing time and space. More generally, such attempts eventuate in a liberation from an unified psychological space, an alienation of the Aristotelian unities of drama and a break from the Cartesian logic of narrative sequence, the fundamental principles that are otherwise typically found in the Western theatrical tradition.

Robert Wilson, for instance, exhibits the disruption of a normal flow of theatrical time vis-à-vis extreme slow motion. In doing so, his work defies the definition of stillness given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: an absence of movement or physical disturbance; motionlessness. (7) Wilson's reliance on excruciatingly slow actions (which in turn produce tension) reveals stillness as a quality of motion, as exemplified by the visual tableaux in *Deafman Glance*. The paradox inherent in stillness being a qualifier of motion lies at the heart of recognising stillness visually: it is impossible for stillness to exist without movement. Arthur Holmberg furnished a succinct summary on the opening of *Deafman Glance*, which was premiered by the Byrds (8) as a 7-hour production at University of Iowa in 1971:

Deafman Glance... begins with a silent prologue: on a white platform, her back to the audience, a mother (Sutton dressed in a black Victorian gown) stands next to a bottle of milk on a high, white table. Reading a comic book, a little boy sits on a low stool. On the floor, a little girl sleeps, covered by a white sheet. The mother, wearing red gloves, puts black gloves over them. In extreme slow motion (the prologue takes forty-five minutes), she pours milk, gives it to boy, returns to table, picks up knife, gently stabs boy, wipes knife clean. Stage left, an older brother (Raymond Andrews) witnesses the event. He screams. The ritual... is repeated on the little girl. Older brother screams again. The mother puts her hand over his mouth. Traumatized by witnessing the murders, he loses the gift of speech. Gray drops, showing a cracked wall, goes up, revealing a magic forest with a pink angel walking backwards. Nine ladies, elegantly clad in white Victorian gowns with white birds on their fingers, listen to *The Moonlight Sonata*. The boy enters this dreamworld. Wonders ensue: A giant frog — dapper in velvet smoking jacket and cravat — lounges at a banquet table, sipping martinis nonchalantly. Men with yellow fish on their backs float across a red river. A magic bench flies the boy through the air. A giant bee and giant bunny wiggle and bump to the pop tune *Mutual Admiration Society*. An ox swallows the sun, his stomach glows, his head falls off. Nine apes crawl up from the ground. As Fauré's *Requiem* sounds, apes pick up red apples. George Washington and Marie-Antoinette stroll in. The queen's parasol bursts into flames. Apples float into space. Stars fall from the heavens. Drop comes down as a banjo strums *When You Are In Love, It's the Loveliest Night of the Year*. (9)

Overall, the rate of motion in this production is retarded so obviously and deliberately that it appears unrealistically slow. The slowness compels one to view each action with intensity, search in it for "a greater than usual concentration of meaning" and then interpret it. Because of such an "interpretative gaze," (10) the actions seem surreal or unreal. As in *Deafman Glance*, each action in Wilson's famous opera *Einstein on the Beach* is slowed to the almost imperceptible segments of a movement, thereby prolonging the duration of performance beyond an average normal limit of concentration. The entire opera, constructed on a monumental scale reminiscent of a grand opera, thus lasted approximately five hours.

Wilson's theatre is quintessentially post-Einsteinian, a quest that seeks to understand a post-Renaissance universe, a world that embodies the laws of uncertainty and the principles

of chaos theory. *Deafman Glance* and *Einstein on the Beach* challenge and question the conventions of theatrical time and space by dissecting every action into its “raw form.” Wilson pays inordinate attention to each minute detail, in movement and in the juxtaposition of object and figure. By disintegrating each action into every smallest possible fragment, by separating form from function, he offers a collage of simultaneous events in both of these works, producing what he coins an “overlay of visual correspondences.” (11)

Although the slowness of the actions defamiliarises and decontextualises them, the retarding tempo distinguishes them as ironically recognisable and distinctly familiar. Even though each extreme slow motion sequence is unique in its own slowness, when taken in total they share an accretion to the cumulative effect of the entire scenescape as still. Thus, the slowed action in itself becomes an ironic disruption of the act of viewing because it fragments both the viewing frame and the arc of the production. Because it demands ostensibly a substantial amount of patience and forced concentration from the spectators, it can compel them to re-examine their own notions of perceptual processes as well as performance.

Fastidiously retarded choreography is also a common trait in Japanese avant-garde director, Tadashi Suzuki’s theatre, an classic illustration being *The Tale of Lear*. Paul Allain describes the production as overwhelming “in the energetic intensity of the performances; the subtlety of expression underneath the forceful utterance of text; and the slow, nuanced choreography that drove the piece forward with a choking relentlessness.” (12) Two climatic episodes in the plot, namely the blinding of Gloucester and Lear’s torment on the heath, are accorded a languishing tempo, exhibiting distractingly detailed facial movements and slow, almost statuesque bodily gestures of the actors. The audience therefore experiences a harsh and direct confrontation with Gloucester’s physical agony and Lear’s mental anguish. This epitomises Suzuki’s notion that a theatre event is mainly about the audience sensing the actor’s “physiological tension.”

An *andante* tempo in performance thus generates a new form of cognition that offers the spectator freshness and immediacy. In *The Tale of Lear*, slowness offers one a new awareness of an actor’s “physiological tension.” (12) In *Deaf-man Glance*, slowness arrests the spectator’s psychology because it requires direct and immediate engagement with the images and ideas presented. Wilson is Stein-inspired because he insists that slow motion portrays what his contemporary, Richard Foreman articulates as “the essence of the object, rather than its aura of cultural and emotional usage.” (13) Due to the slow motion, the audience is less likely to be encumbered with projections or memories that in turn trigger side tangents of thought. (14) The audience is less likely to be distanced or distracted from what is actually taking place on the stage. By not invading the privacy of the audience’s psychology, Wilson is acknowledging his spectator as a performing self, like the actor, the director or the playwright. Each audience member, from his stand-point, can be a co-artist.

Stillness as a means of reshaping the relationship between artist and audience

Wilson’s recognition of the audience as co-artists of a theatrical experience depicts a newly formulated dynamic in the relationship between the audience and performers during a creative process. André Gregory of the Manhattan Theatre Project affirms: “It is evident that barriers are dis-appearing between those who are the audience and those who are the artists.” (15) In his deliberate allocation of time and space for the spectators, Wilson explores a pivotal element of avant-garde art: the indispensable essentiality of the “pre-sently present” spectator

in producing and finishing creative art. This notion is also valuable because its existence reminds one not to undermine or underestimate the significance of the phenomenology of perception made possible by stillness vis-à-vis painstakingly slow motion.

By creating such a “time and space” for the audience, Wilson practises Marcel Duchamp’s philosophy that an artist is only partially accountable for any creative activity. In re-evaluating a varying sense of reality, the latter has concluded:

All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work into contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. (16)

Wilson agrees with Duchamp because he recognises that the audience deserves such a space for a contemplative and meaningful engagement with their theatrical experience. Instead of being enslaved to the linear flow of conventional narrative and “receiving the promised emotional or intel-lectual payoff at the end,” (17) each audience member in the theatre owns (as well as earns) an individual space for contemplation and meditation. One ceases to be a passive consumer of a theatrical experience, becoming what Roland Barthes calls “producer(s) of the text in a literary work i.e. literature as work.” (18) The artist is “mediumistic,” in Duchamp’s vocabulary. He is simply a person from the “labyrinth beyond time and space through whom the work of art was expressed,” thus serving as an intermediary between an idea and the spectator, the latter being the ultimate creator or performer in the work of art.

An emotional syncopation between theatrical events and the spectator’s reactions further legitimises such a space for the audience. “Nervousness,” Stein writes in clarifying her ambivalence about the theatre, “is the certain proof that the emotion of the one seeing and the emotion of the thing seen do not progress together.” (19) Predicated upon her belief that an “asynchronicity, or ‘syncopation’ between observer and action” is almost impossibly elusive, she asserts, “The time of one’s emotion in relation to the scene was always interrupted.” (20) Thus, Wilson’s creation of a “time and space to think” for his audience is his effort to minimise, or even eliminate any form of “nervousness” during a performance, “nervousness” that arises due to “the fact that the emotion of the one seeing the play is always ahead or behind the play.” (21)

Suzuki, whose directorial works and performance theories derive inspiration from the philosophy of Zeami (one of the originators of Japanese *Noh* drama), labels the state of being physically fixed as “the sacred space,” both a visible and invisible space that connects to an actor’s body. Con-structing a polarity between a “sacred space” and a “worldly space” (a geographical-life entity, not necessarily a theatrical space, where an actor puts up his performance), Suzuki regards such a “sacred space” as an authority for the body of an actor, supporting and guiding his movements when he adjusts himself to various “worldly spaces” for performances.

“Actors in the modern theatre,” as Suzuki writes, “have to cope one day with a small theatre in a private hall and the next with a huge stage in some prefectural cultural centre.” (21) Since such adjustment is fatiguing physically and emotionally, an actor must seek refuge and replenishment in an internal “sacred space,” an unchanging space that one has internalised in one’s body when being still. How much replenishment one requires varies and in turn determines how long one can maintain a still posture. This “sacred space” is a theatrical space that the body can remember and recall. Suzuki likens the nature of this sacred

space to that of a *Noh* actor: it is “so much a part of his being that even if he could no longer use his eyes, he would never fall off the stage.” (22) In this “sacred space” the actor thus finds for himself a form of stillness that provides him strength to resist the usual response of fatigue. Stillness allows actors to be in control of their physical “selves” when performing and to be “in their element.” Within this form of stillness, the body tends not to weaken when attempting to accommodate arbitrary changes in theatrical space. On the contrary, an actor can move about on any stage instinctively, as if it were a *Noh* stage.

Stillness as a state of physical fixation

Through the lens of movement, stillness, in its technical sense, means being completely quiescent. If being immobile provides a reservoir for an actor to derive energies for an act of “self-penetration,” in Grotowski’s epistemology, such that the actor formulates “a sort of invitation to the spectator” (23) to partake in this process of “self-penetration,” then being stationary becomes a qualifier of motion. Physical motionlessness becomes visible immediately as a distinct form of movement that occurs after sharp halts, rapidity, and intentional slow motion. Therefore, it is a form of athleticism, one that contains a heightened quality of energy, one that condenses theatrical time and space within an actor’s body. When fixed, an actor allows his body to be locked in space at the precise “present present.”

In *Butoh*, every physical fixation of the dancer’s body (whether it is in a distorted form, awkward position or sophisticated stylisation) transforms the physical discomfort and discipline of the performer into a sort of spiritual freedom, through which energies can be channelled from the performer towards the audience. During a *Butoh* dance, one succeeds in objectifying oneself each time one locks the body in space, conducts the movement in slowness, and executes the actions with exactitude. One does not make a movement: one gesticulates. The static quality of movements in a *Butoh* production manages to trap the audience in aesthetics, since each audience member sees the performer as an object, and his slow movements as a series of images. *Butoh* thus validates Grotowski’s well-known declaration: “Impulse and action are concurrent: the body vanishes, burns, and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses.” (24)

The need to create a “time and space to think” becomes redundant in *Butoh* because an order of time, actually never exists. *Butoh* is thus “timeless,” as Hijikata describes, since time is absent as a defining parameter of its structure. In addition, he believes *Butoh* to be “making gestures of the dead, to die again, to make the dead reenact once more their deaths in their entirety... to die over and over again...” (25) For the celebrated *Butoh* dancer Min Tanaka, however, the *Butoh*’s “timeless” nature allows him to dance “so slowly that he [I] was almost invisible:” (26)

... Our speeds are controlled by the world. Hijikata initiated a movement that would never arrive at the destination in order to counterattack controlled speeds. As for me, I took on a speed by abandoning speed. The deviation and discontinuous equilibrium of the body for destroying the order of time. The stable immobility like abandoned slippers. (26)

Slow motion in *Butoh* is the experience in itself: it is actuality, not illusion. Consider the solo performance of Japan’s *Butoh* dancer, Sankai Juku, *Dance: Homage to Pre-History*. (27) During the performance, a taut rope lowered him from above the bridge. He remained undisturbed in a fetal position, sustaining this inverted position for more than twenty minutes. Slowly and gradually, he then unfolded himself from the fetal position. Here, both the

spectators and performer are aware of the actual circumstances of the happenings, because Sankai Juku's still but inverted posture places both the audience and himself at real risk. The prolonged effect of his motionlessness renders his subsequent unfolding a painful procedure (to perform and witness). This process embodies the struggle and resistance of fighting against gravity in reality. Witnessing Sankai Juku's state of suspension, it is only natural that audience feared witnessing him fall headlong into the waters, since they understood clearly that they were watching a perilous occurrence that could easily culminate in death.

During a subsequent and identical version of the performance, the staged risk turned out to be real. A rope broke accidentally when dancers from the Sankai Juku *Butoh* Company were performing in Washington, D.C. on September 10, 1995. A performer, Yoshiyuki Tadaka fell to his death. (28) The risk inherent in this *Butoh* performance dismantled the conventional theatrical illusion successfully by altering the focus of both the dancer and the audience to reality. By choosing to perform outdoors, Sankai Juku, for instance, did not lead his spectators out of their own psyche, like in the escapist manner of a naturalistic or romantic theatre. Instead, he led the audience into concentrating all their energies when witnessing him hang and unfold in an inverted position. They were thus no longer fixing their attention on him as an art, but as an occurrence in real time and space. Reactions towards Tadaka's death in Washington, D.C. were violent because the entire incident was perceived as more of an accident than as a failure in having completed a performance artwork. *Butoh* has achieved more than making its spectator think: it has succeeded in disturbing the spectator on a very profound level of consciousness. Antonin Artaud: "In a true theatre a play disturbs the senses' repose." (29)

Stillness as repetition in speech and images

To present plays that are "thoughtful of recognitions" and "contain less subject-matter," (30) Wilson conducts repetition in speech and images, repetition being his technique for creating a "continuous present" and disrupting/distorting the normal flow of theatrical time via the lenses of space (images) and language (speech). Unlike Wagner who invents leitmotiv (repeating fragments of musical ideas in variations) to "produce a definite impression on the feeling, inciting it to a function akin to thought," (31) Wilson designates repetition to displace potential psychological connotation from speech and images. The rhythms of repetition pulse through his works, extracting the essence of language and images so that they become only what they are to the audience: words and visual constituents existing in their non-reducible form.

Actions performed during Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach* appear as mechanical, emotionless and incapable of being interpreted as meaning or mood, primarily because they operate primarily on repetitive, technical mathematical computations. In human consciousness, on the other hand, the attenuation does not necessarily preclude entropy and decline. The greatest capacity of the mind, as John Cage comments, is its propensity to "turn its own tables and see meaninglessness as ultimate meaning." (32) Because all actions in *Einstein on the Beach* demand obsessive attention from the actors, the actors must thus articulate each gesture with extreme precision. Only then can they portray onstage an "inner and outer reality." (32)

The opening scene, for example, introduces Lucinda Child who dances repetitively but spellbindingly on a diagonal line across the stage for approximately one hour. But a viewer needs only about five minutes of performance to acquire a ritualised sense of time and space.

The confusing conflation of time happens because Child repeats her actions so frequently and predictably that they become a mechanical and monotonous sequence. Stillness thus surfaces from this ritualised sense of time and space.

Einstein on the Beach's flawless regularity and structured presentation parallels the almost incredible scientific and mathematical ingenuity of Einstein. In addition, its music and overall rhythm resemble the repetitive but regular beats of a metronome. In one scene, for example, the mop-haired physicist demonstrates a pencil movement exactly sixty-four times. As a mathematical fact, sixty-four is a unique number that can only be fragmented into even numbers. In this case, Wilson is using a mathematical fact to highlight the importance of regularity and order in the performance, which in turn underlines the significance of absolutism in scientific advancements.

Wilson's intent to eliminate contents ostensibly becomes contested because not telling a narrative becomes quite telling. Although a linear story with psychological tendencies is absent in *Einstein on the Beach*, the play conveys meaning by flirting with the dichotomy of Einstein as a scientist as opposed to Einstein as a dreamer. Implicitly, the recurring images of a train, a trial and a spaceship question the social repercussions of scientific progress, thus challenging the perceived social significance of science. Other repetitive sets of surrealistic images — nineteenth-century locomotives and modern spaceships appearing or reappearing on the stage in each act, the clock moving asynchronously and backward, figures "swimming" on plexiglass tables, other performers counting fitfully and taking obsessive notes — all convey the thematic concerns of the piece: Einstein's theories of time, space, and motion (often explained by analogies to moving trains), the tub of mercerised water that measures the speed of light, bodies moving in the vacuum of space, biographical references to Einstein, and so forth. The constant repetition of these images creates a rhythmic structure, just as the images themselves get repeated in newscasts, commercials, and magazine advertisements. In art, repetition creates a new visual structure that replaces (or even eliminates) its older compositional relationships; in Wilson's theatre, it mimicks the visual iconography and rhythmic patterns of daily life. Repetition thus allows his audience to experience images as something more than a mere conduit for retrieving the necessary information of a linear narrative plot. It allows the spectator, as Peter Brook feels, "to make connections, conscious or unconscious, between different textual moments, to see past and present as related and as establishing a future that will be noticeable as some variation in the pattern." (33)

Repetition is the most notable trademark of Stein's literature, although the writer prefers the term "insistence." She questions the possibility of having repetition in the literal sense, a refutation that the young post-modern dancer, Yvonne Rainer echoes after performing a solo work entitled *The Bells* at the Living Theatre in 1961:

I remember thinking that dance was at a disadvantage in relation to a sculpture, in that the spectator could spend as much time as he required to examine a sculpture, walk around it, and so forth — but a dance movement — because it happened in time — vanished as soon as it was executed. So in... *The Bells* I repeated the same seven movements for eight minutes. It was not exact repetition, as the sequence of the movements kept changing. They also underwent changes through being repeated in different parts of the space and faced in different directions — in a sense allowing the spectator to 'walk around it.' (34)

Rainer recognises the paradoxical spirit of repetition: it necessitates and produces changes. As Stein has indicated, identity is never feasible in a pure form within the bounds of time ("while anybody is alive") (35) even if repetition seems to fabricate itself around resemblance

or identity. Hence, any action that a live performer repeats must undergo transformation of some kind, invariably and inevitably. Stein confirms:

There can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis. And so let us think seriously of the difference between repetition and insistence. Anybody can be interested in a story of a crime because no matter how often the witnesses tell the same story the insistence is different. This is what makes life that the insistence is different, no matter how often you tell the same story if there is anything alive in the telling the emphasis is different. (35)

Stillness as a means of displacing language

When Barry Lopez proposes poetically that “stillness which permeates the valleys is visual as well as acoustical,” he also confirms Wilson’s more radical stance towards speech: a bypass of language. The latter displaces speech from the centre of the stage, as in *Deafman Gance*, “a play without words.” (36) Emancipating the play from the use of verbal language, he rejects language as a prerequisite for communication between actors, as well as between actors and spectators. In this sense, he breaks away from the intellectual subjugation of the language. By interrogating language, he discards it totally. Instead, he employs silence as the exclusive stage language for *Deafman Gance*. Silence allows one to observe the mother’s murder act as ritual. Silence speaks of another language that underlines a ritual-istic demonstration of life beginning and life ending. It highlights life as a ritual process, rather than exhibiting the actions within life.

Wilson’s marginalisation of language is his reaction against “words in a dried out, flat, one-dimensional literary structure” in so far as “fragments and hidden detail become without words suddenly transparent.” (36) His rejection of speech as a fundamental element in theatre capitalises on Cage’s philosophy of silence: it is an expression of creativity and freedom, a representation of space, and a manifestation of non-intentionality. Under the influence of Zen teachings, Cage believes that silence can be a form of visual space. Like the stones arranged in the sand of a Japanese rock garden, silence is “the emptiness of the sand which needs the stones anywhere in the space in order to be empty.” (37) Like Wilson who destroys practically all artistic intentions to refocus his spectators’ view onto the surroundings of the performance, Cage believes that silence is a type of non-intentional music that “makes it clear to the listener that the hearing of the piece is his own action.” (38)

Ironically, having non-verbal means of communication dominate his works allows Wilson to revitalise successfully the power of words, thereby producing a cleansing effect on theatre. Consider the text sung by the chorus for the rhythmically complex passages in *Einstein on the Beach*: the text contains not words, but motives made up of exclusively numbers and solfège syllabi. The implications are two-fold: the text becomes the description of the music. The solfège syllabi are the names of the notes (*do, re, me, fa, sol, la, te, do*) and the numbers the rhythmic structure. Numbers also give form to the mathematical language that constitutes Einstein’s scientific reasoning operates and his theory of relativity. Such language is not verbal, further illustrating Wilson’s interest in expressing a notion of stillness founded on visual and spatial (and not aural) logic.

Obviously, the infiltration of Artaud’s envisioned “non-verbal theatre” leaves its traces in Wilson’s works. While Wilson asks for an absence of barrier between the audience and the stage, Artaud understands that “the seemingly common-sense distinction between the work

and the person who produces a piece of writing, between the public and private utterance, becomes void” (39) when writing ceases to “define itself.” (39) He banalises language and objects to theatre being subordinate to speech as the dominant form of expression since the Greek times. Instead, he adopts an anti-textual attitude towards theatre. In fact, he ordains theatre to the function of bridging the gap between language and flesh. As he advocates his “First Manifesto” for the Theatre of Cruelty:

... instead of continuing to rely upon texts considered definitive and sacred, it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theatre to the text, and to recover the notion of kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought. (40)

Theatre critic Paul Goodman feels otherwise, criticising what he sees as Artaud’s ignorance of the interpersonal effect of words. He reasons:

... they (the words) get under the skin. And not only by their tone but especially by their syntax and style: the mood, voice and person of sentences, the coordination and subordination of clauses. The personalities of men are largely their speech habits, and in the drama of personalities the thing — language that Artaud is after is not sufficient; we need text, but a text not of ideas and thoughts, but of syntactical relations. (41)

The argument for “a text not of ideas and thoughts, but of syntactical relations” (41) is considerably solid and valid. Notably, Artaud’s erosion of language is paradoxical, since he himself relies on language as the vehicle to propagate his idea of marginalising it. He uses his ends to obtain his means, and the means to obtain his ends. After completing *Revolt Against Poetry*, in his bid to recover a vocabulary of gesture and spectacle in theatre, Artaud had no other option but to resign himself to a discourse of language. In his campaign to transcend language, he submits all his ideologies to language. In revolt, Artaud himself express in speech his most ardent revulsion against speech. He may have declared that “all writing is garbage” (*The Nerve Meter*) in its literal sense, yet he safeguards the risky but quasi-magical status of writing as a vessel worthy of bearing his emotional anguish.

In this respect, one may regard Artaud’s “theatre” as the “stillest,” if one takes into account the meaning of “still” in its most literal sense. In view of an unexcited and unreceptive public, his influence derived ironically no support from the productions in the two theatres that he had founded, the Alfred Jarry Theatre and the Theatre of Cruelty. 41

Susan Sontag states:

Artaud did not succeed in affecting the conscience of the modern theater by himself being, as Brecht was, a great director... His practical work in the theater between 1926 and 1935 was apparently so unseductive that it has left virtually no trace, whereas the idea of theater on behalf of which he urged his productions... has become ever more potent. (42)

In addition, she assesses his writings as “work that cancels itself, thought that outbids thought, recommendations that cannot be enacted.” Further, Sontag provides a thought-provoking response that underlines much of an inevitable irony inherent in Artaud’s literature:

Still with a body of work (which will run to about fifteen volumes in the Gallimard collected editions in French), even though the character of Artaud’s writings forbids their being treated

simply as 'literature.' Still with a body of thought, even though Artaud's thought forbids assent — as his aggressively self-immolating personality forbids identification. (43)

If one gives credit to Wagner for recognizing gesture, "originating in the most physical of dance's postures, to have evolved to the most intellectual *mimik*," (44) and that "verse melody, from a mere thinking of an emotion, has advanced to the most 'present' enunciation of an emotion," stillness may be regarded as an emotion in itself, for it is a trait of gesture. Insisting that "music cannot think," Wagner believes it to be so only because it can collect and "materialize thoughts." By this, Wagner means that music conveys the emotional contents of the audience's consciousness as "no longer merely recollected, but made present." In this light, Artaud's language too "cannot think" because it is capable of collecting and materializing thoughts.

When and where is Stillness Still?

Just as the psychological pressure on an actor to keep still on stage is immense, the pressure for a theatre of stillness to exist in its most perfect and aesthetic form is equally intense. A performer on stage can never remain entirely still; the notion of stillness, likewise, does not rest upon what it advocates literally. The existence of a theatre of stillness feeds on what it fails to be. As Cocteau says, "The only work which succeeds is that which fails." It is not sufficient to recognize Artaud's visions of theatre as utopia, nor is it realizing the paradoxical nature of stillness being a quality of motion and language, as manifested in the works from a phalanx of artists (Wilson, Suzuki, Juko, Stein, Cage, Artaud) in the East and the West. Further, recognition of Artaud's vision of theatre as utopia cannot justify the imperfections encountered when attempting to reconcile the inexhaustible parodies and paradoxes entangled within the attempted portrayal of stillness. Sontag expresses strongly, "Artaud's work becomes usable according to our needs, but the work vanishes behind our use of it." (45) To state that defining stillness is only a journey to search for, or work towards stillness is too feeble an affirmation, for stillness itself is not the destination. It is a journey where the meaning lies in the traveling. Why does Suzuki want his actors to perceive keeping still as the stage of preparing, as a state of containing a potential for something else to happen? Is it merely a state from which to convert potential to kinetic and other forms of energies? Or is it because the state of keeping still sustains interest in and of itself?

The "unstillness" of stillness disturbs the stillness in which it has its existence. "The vase gives shape to emptiness, music to silence." (46) Such is Georges Braque's assessment, an observation that John Hawkes admiringly made, a reference that Wallace Steven used in his poem, *The Anecdote of the Jar*. Silence contains its own sounds, immobility contains its own mobility, time contains both finity and infinity. In fact, silence intersects with sounds, motionlessness intersects with movements, and "in the intersection, there is an air of memories, encounters, of strange absurd, and very important things." (Robert Desnos) Stillness is one of these "very important things." Stillness seeks more to suggest than to define fully. Wilson serves as an example; his avant-garde aim for disrupting and destroy discursive language completely in favour of images and silence is specific, but John Cage's remarks can hardly be dismissed: "There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot." (47)

Stillness is meant to be restless, as Garrett suggests: "a restlessness with the old — old forms, old conventions, old ways of seeing and saying things — and a hunger for the new."

(48) Because stillness thrives in both “the Oriental theatre of metaphysical tendencies” and “the Occidental theatre of psychological tendencies,” it enjoys the privilege of being a universal performance grammar. Stillness is not competitive or attractive because of its paradoxical nature; it is appealing because of the series of paradoxes within its paradoxical nature. Echoing Artaud’s announcement to “produce art that is at the same time anti-art,” artists who wish to portray stillness produce stillness that is at the same time “anti-stillness.”(49) The purpose of stillness is not to dictate what it is, or to exhibit its nature; it is to lay bare the question that have been hidden by the answers.

Can one then perceives stillness as equivalent to Robert Browning’s paradoxical dictum, “less is more”? Not necessarily, for it suggests differently; it is neither a shortage nor an excess. As Cage points out, if one opts not to “discriminate between intention and non-intention, the splits, subject-object, art-life, etc., disappear.” (50) Stillness is, therefore, not stillness, yet stillness. It is like the structure of Georges Braque’s vase, both an interior and an exterior, and the intersection of the two.

Notes

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7. <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00237721>.
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20. Puchner, Martin. *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality & Drama*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002. 102.
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22. *Ibid*, 90.
23. Roose-Evans, James. *Experimental Theatre from Stanislavsky to Peter Brook*. London & New York: Routledge Publishers, 1984. 150.
24. *Ibid*, 158.
25. O'More, Haven, ed.. *Butoh: Dance of Dark Soul*. United States of America: Aperture Foundation, 1987.
26. *Ibid*, 64.
27. *Dance: Homage to Pre-History* is a spectacular outdoor piece performed by Sankai Juku (Butoh) Dance Company. The debut performance was presented by Sankai Juku in 1981 at a bridge in Venice, a T.V. location for Young European Venice Festival.
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