



PROPOSAL
FOR A
THEATER OF PURE ATTENTION

Proposal for a Theater of Pure Attention

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Imagine this: you walk east down Bleeker Street until it meets the Bowery. You stop, uncertain, and surveil the passers-by, examining, one by one, the people who are for some reason standing still. Ah! There she is, paused in the act of crossing the street, waiting for a light; but when the light goes green she does not cross. She is carrying a book, and it is by this you recognize her: a book with a bright geometry like a signal flag's on the cover. You see that the broad red triangle visible behind her hand is pointing down – the show hasn't started. She looks ordinary, like anyone who might be walking in that neighborhood, striped t-shirt, rolled up jeans. You glance around and find a few other people who could be members of the audience, but it's hard to tell. The actor shifts her book so the arrow points up, and the play's begun! You bend your head, consult your own copy – you've been invited to see a new play called....

What are you doing here, on a street corner in late spring? Could it be that you are attending a performance of the Theater of Pure Attention? It's true this theater does not yet exist, and if it did, it would be more than a little absurd, but this does not stop us from imagining or even creating it.

The theater of attention is an instructional theater. Admittedly, many would prefer not to be instructed. Attention itself prefers not to be instructed but rather to dart and shift freely, looking around, looking out, looking in. How do we account for that strange feeling, even in our own ordinary awareness, that there is something missing, something not seen but happening, invisible simply because we are not turning our attention towards it?

Attention moves. It is vulnerable to capture by outside sources – a phone conversation going on a few feet away, snowy trees out the train window, a grilled cheese sandwich which is not your own. Unison of awareness is almost impossible, sustained in fits and starts. Absorption requires pull as well as push, to be at play in the game of reading, driving, daydreaming, watching. Mere looking is almost never enough, but more often acts something like a cinematic for the constant interior conversations of the mind.

What kind of theater could be made of this stuff? An invisible theater, one that, quite perversely, refuses to call attention to itself in the realm of the senses. Outwardly, everything looks quite ordinary; all the motion is interior, in the spaces of the mind.

This theater could take place undetectably on a train, an elusive transmission of mutual awareness between passengers. It could be performed in the most controlled environments: airport security lines, museum galleries full of Rembrandts or Mondrians, jail exercise yards, family gatherings. It could be carried out in the loose conglomerate of semi-public spaces we ordinarily inhabit – sidewalks, cafes, stores, markets, parks. Its invisibility, in this sense, is its strength. Like the thoughts in our heads it can take place anywhere, virtually unsurveillably: a public act of theater that eludes control.

If nothing is shown, how could the audience possibly be aware of the performance? It would have to be broadcast as a set of signals which activate knowledge and mutual understanding acquired elsewhere: off-stage. It could be transmitted in the form of instructions for the direction of attention; the audience given a kind of script, a written sequence of internal motions carried out by the player.

Communication between player and audience takes place through subtle external flagging – a handkerchief hanging from a back pocket like the bandana codes of 1970s Castro San Francisco (a handkerchief pieced together like a signal flag, shifted restlessly from pocket to pocket, hand to hand, mop the brow, tie it on a wrist, around the head, around a bag). Instructions could be carried by devices, networked, through signals timed and sent, perhaps just a series of vibrations to indicate a shifting of acts. Members of the audience are by definition cognoscenti – they must already know the code, or the performance remains entirely invisible. It is at best, infra-visible.

If you married the idea of a flag (for signaling) with the need for scripts (for particular plays), the medium of transmission could become a book with a flag-like cover. Everyone at the performance has a copy of the book, but the player carries it in a certain, prescribed manner, flagging herself, so to speak. The cover can be held in various orientations, signaling the progression of events (I count 14 possible orientations for a book held in one hand, twice that if you distinguish between right and left, more if you lift, move, swing the book). All that needs to be known in advance by everyone involved is the location and time of the performance and the page number on which to find the particular script.

One corollary of a theater that does not call attention to itself is that in operating entirely without spectacle it would, in its own right, be difficult to attend to. It risks, even courts, boredom. For the audience as much as the performer distraction is inevitable. The work consists of the knowledge that the work is taking place. But it also consists of the experience of trying to attend to the work. This will naturally be elusive and fragmentary. Full reception demands an attentional virtuosity on the part of the audience as much or more as on the part of the performer. What then can an ordinary audience member expect? They can expect to be set adrift on the waters of their own turbulent awareness. They can expect their eyes to shift here and there restlessly, forgetting the task of looking at what is admittedly almost nothing. They can expect an uneasiness, a doubt to creep into their thoughts – what is this I'm supposed to be watching, anyway? The task of being a perfect audience for the Theater of Pure Attention is in fact impossible. What is revealed is a portrait of the experiencer, a sequence of thoughts, of habits of mind, of perceptions and memories. Perhaps a whole conversation

with someone not present. Perhaps planning out an intricate sequence of actions. Perhaps a Proustian dive into memory brought on by the sound of a dog barking or the smell of onions on the grill of a nearby halal cart.

Nevertheless, in gathering publicly for a particular attention performance, there is an alchemical reaction that may perhaps form among the participants. No matter how fixed or distracted attention has been, everyone knows that *something took place*. What exactly, we're never sure.

So, what might the scripts be like? A few first acts:

Act One: The player directs their attention to things in the environment that are white.

or

Act One: The player searches the environment for what is most like a bird.

or

Act One: The player directs their attention to aspects of environment or situation that act as regulations.

or

Act One: The player weeps inside.

or

Act One: Forgetting everything she once knew about herself, the player waits attentively to be constituted by the place she finds herself in.

or

Act One: Fall down.

or

Act One: light candy train whistle.

Act Two: curtain bold snow happening.

Act Three: sky flickering wallet lean.

or

Act One: Careful

Act Two: Restless

Act Three: Ordinary

One notices, immediately, that the problems of this form are in part literary. In other words, while the members of the audience might have the opportunity to watch the player in action, their knowledge of what is happening would take place through reading. Really, any sort of short form literature has the potential to work here, or fail. One could imagine an entirely adverbial theater. Or a theater of nouns.

Adverbial Play

(Note: the acts are not marked by changes in the outward physical movements of the player, but rather by changes in the manner of their thoughts or the direction of their attention.)

Act One: *(Innocently)*

Act Two: *(Fearfully)*

Act Three: *(Narrowly)*

Act Four: *(Regretfully)*

Act Five: *(Redemptively)*

Play for a Museum

Act One

Player: *(Player notices someone nearby and fixates her attention on that person while keeping their eyes occupied with something else).*

Act Two

Player: *(Player tries to forget that person).*

Act Three

Player: *(Player, unable to forget the person, but having only caught that one initial glimpse, attempts to direct their attention towards what that person was attending to).*

Act Four

Player: *(Player, their memory of the person fraying as their imagination overtakes the initial glimpse, tries to locate the effect of the person).*

Act Five

Player: *(Nothing is left now of the player but the player, any effect of the encounter with that person has been entirely absorbed into the self of the player).*

The length of the acts can be decided in advance, or can be chosen spontaneously by the player. The movement between acts could be marked by any of a number of cues (taking a step, changing the orientation of a book, a gesture like stretching or tying a shoe, a change in body posture or the position of the hands), but the type of cue should be indicated to the audience as part of the script.

If the theater of attention implies *plays*, "attention performance" could operate with event *scores*. Might the idea of scores also make possible a "Music of Attention?" Beyond the theater of attention, there could also be a theater of imagination, theater of emotions, thought performance, music of daydreams, intention actions, cognitive happenings?

The scripts or scores for the theater of attention (and its related forms) could also be generative, with an underlying meta-script and algorithms which create new plays on the spot. These could be delivered to the performer/audience/participants either by hand (a messenger) or through technological means. In this way the Theater of Attention could be one of infinite play.

Five Word Plays for the Theater of Pure Attention

Act One

wait

Act Two

hoping

Act Three

yeah

Act Four

talking

Act Five

oh

Act One

younger

Act Two

violence

Act Three

loll

Act Four

graze

Act Five

reduced

Act One

Buddhist

Act Two

eyes

Act Three

after

Act Four

inaction

Act Five

trusts

Act One

tea

Act Two

out

Act Three

not

Act Four

had

Act Five

has

Act One

various

Act Two

under

Act Three

customary

Act Four

says

Act Five

formal