

## *The Paradox of the Self. Beyond Identity*

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**Abstract:** In 2023, the invasion of the stage during a performance by the trans woman Keyla Brasil at a theatre venue in Lisbon, as part of a protest that claimed for the visibility of transgender performers, spawned numerous reactions. One of the most common was that such action meant an offense to the principle of theatrical representation and the ‘art of acting’.

This idea of theatre as a place of illusion, where the self presents itself as the non-self, is commonly accepted as an interpretation of Diderot’s *The Paradox of the Actor*, but we are convinced that describing Diderot’s idea of the actor as someone who never seems to be himself is not an accurate interpretation.

We will therefore read Diderot’s paradox following two postmodern interpretations by Lacoue-Labarthe and Eyal Peretz and adding the contributions of biologists who have been working with recent microbiological knowledge that challenges notions of One and the Individual. Our goal is to describe the action of Keyla Brasil not as an ‘interruption’ of a performance but as a complex intersection of (re)presentations that think with each other, destabilizing epistemic boundaries between one and the other, actor and character or performer and audience. We are convinced that the descriptions and vocabulary that emerge from this discussion will allow us to cast a new light not only on Diderot’s idea of the actor but also on Keyla Brasil’s action, taking us a step further in Lacoue-Labarthe’s and Peretz’s considerations on the self and the actor.

**Keywords:** Theatre, representation, Diderot, Keyla Brasil, actor, the self.

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*“That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility”*

Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

In January 2023, the ‘invasion’ of the stage by the transgender woman Keyla Brasil during Teatro do Vão’s performance of Samuel Adamanson’s dramatic adaptation of Pedro Almodóvar’s movie *All About My Mother*, at a theatre venue in Lisbon, as part of a protest that claimed for the visibility of transgender performers, spawned numerous and unexpected reactions in Portugal’s public opinion. The large majority of newspaper articles, television commentators and social network opinionators regretted Keyla Brasil’s personal, financial and professional situation, but regarded her action as an attack on theatre’s freedom. One of the most common observations declared that Keyla Brasil offended the principle of theatrical representation and the ‘art of acting’ by claiming that a transgender character could only be played by a transgender person.

Before entering this discussion, we would like to make clear that Keyla Brasil’s action should be firstly considered as part of a discussion that looks at inequality and working conditions for transgender persons and actors, as well as at what was mentioned by the activists themselves, when they claim, in a manifesto published in the LGBTQI+ website ‘*esqrever*’, they are protesting against “transfake casting”.<sup>1</sup> However, in this paper, we would like to look at this performative event, by tackling the ideas of the actor and the self that are implied not only in Keyla Brasil’s action but also in the reactions it prompted in the public opinion, and read them with the help of a certain reception and interpretation of Diderot’s *Paradox of the Actor*, thus hoping to not only interfere in a way of talking about acting in theatre as well as on representation (and *mimesis*) in the performing arts. By doing so, we will also try to describe Keyla Brasil’s action not as an invasion or interruption of an artistic performance, but to consider it in its continuity with the performance, thus complexifying the distinction between actor and audience, fiction and reality or art and politics.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://esqrever.com/2023/01/21/manifesto-diz-nao-ao-casting-transfake/>.

This approach allows us to ponder on how a certain idea of the actor has been conditioning and simplifying descriptions of performances and its relations with the world. Seeing the spectator as the inhabitant of the (real) world and the actor as the inhabitant of the (fictional) performance simplifies and downgrades the complexity of Keyla Brasil's particular action. We would like to work on a description that acknowledges the protest not just against the current representation of transgender performers in the theatrical stages, but also against a certain idea of theatre and, finally, against a metaphysical normative conception of the self.

### *Dramatic Theatre*

"The invasion of the stage at Teatro São Luiz during the performance *All About My Mother* by the transgender actress and performer Keyla Brasil puts at stake the principle of the art of acting."<sup>2</sup> "The controversial invasion of the São Luiz stage by a trans woman has ignited the debate about what acting is."<sup>3</sup> Or, as Manuel Carvalho put it in his editorial in the Portuguese daily national mainstream newspaper *Público*, "The fight against transfake is political, it is not art."<sup>4</sup> These are examples of some of the reactions prompted by Keyla Brasil's action. Accompanying such considerations, there frequently came the idea of theatre as the stronghold of magic and the purity of representation, which should not allow itself to be contaminated by (political) issues of representativeness. The yielding of the performance, of the company and of the theater to the demand of the protest – the production actually substituted the cisgender actor by a transgender actress – opened, according to these opinions, the Pandora's box that stroke the final blow on the possibility of all bodies representing any bodies. As a Portuguese actress wrote on Facebook: "We [Theater] will lose our identity".

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<sup>2</sup> <https://tvi.iol.pt/noticias/videos/perplexidades/perplexidades-keyla-brasil-invadiu-pecas-mas-esta-nao-e-a-primeira-vez-que-a-reivindicacao-chega-a-arte-de-representar/63d439280cf28f3e15c964de>

<sup>3</sup> [https://ionline.sapo.pt/artigo/790849/transfake-uma-luta-pela-representacao-e-visibilidade?seccao=Portugal\\_i](https://ionline.sapo.pt/artigo/790849/transfake-uma-luta-pela-representacao-e-visibilidade?seccao=Portugal_i)

<sup>4</sup> Carvalho, Manuel. editorial "A luta contra o transfake é política, não é arte", *Público*, January 23, 2023.

There is an obvious connection between such arguments and a traditional interpretation of Diderot's famous dictum in *The Paradox of the Actor*: "c'est parce qu'il nest rien qu'il est tout par excellence." [It is because he (the actor) is nothing that he is before all everything]<sup>5</sup>. This description of the actor's self has been used by a theatrical tradition or genre which is usually comprised within the concept 'dramatic theatre', namely those performances that consider theatre to be the representation or animation of plays and characters.

As stated by these opinions, theatre is the place of illusion '*par excellence*'. When Keyla Brasil claimed that she (and not a cisgender actor), as a transgender woman, should be playing the role of the character who is a transgender woman, she was supposedly challenging the basic theatrical convention that confirms the stage as a place where one can be anything, i.e. where the self is the other, the non-self. If Keyla Brasil's claim were to be attended, it was said, this would set a precedent that is contrary to theatre and its essence, in the sense that, in theatre, one necessarily recognizes the boundary between the self and the non-self. According to such reasoning this explains why, when watching a performance, we do not jump on stage to interfere with the narrative, since we know we would only interfere with the performance. We know the actor on stage is no one, in the sense that he or she is a representation, a character, an illusion, a protean and virtuous figure capable of living every possible fiction and therefore a body without a self.

Such analysis should however be contextualized and contradicted.

### *Histories and concepts*

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with the emergence of performance, as a genre drawing on the avant-garde and performance art, but also as a paradigm of study and theories in social and linguistic sciences (Richard Schechner, Victor Turner, Erving Goffman, Elisabeth Burns, Fischer-Lichte, Judith Butler or J. L. Austin are some of its most prominent thinkers), the idea of the actor underwent

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<sup>5</sup> Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres. Tome IV. Esthétique – Théâtre* (Paris: Robert Lafont, 1996), 1401. I will quote Diderot from the original French text. The English translation will adapt or transcribe Walter Herries Pollock translation published in *Collected Works of Denis Diderot* (Hastings, East Sussex: Delphi Classics, 1883).

significant transformations. These transformations were discussed by theatre artists like Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, Augusto Boal, Wooster Group, Robert Wilson, among many others. The prominent Canadian theatre scholar Josette Féral described it with the following words in her 1982 key article, "Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified":

"The conventional basis of the actor's 'art', inspired by Stanislavski, requires the actor to live his character from within and conceal the duplicity that inhabits him while he is on stage. Brecht rose up against this illusion when he called for a distancing of the actor from his part and a distancing of the spectator from the stage. When he is faced with this problem, the performer's response is original, since it seems to resolve the dilemma by completely renouncing character and putting the artist himself on stage. (...) From then on, since it tells of nothing and imitates no one, performance escapes all illusion and representation."<sup>6</sup>

Féral developed the argument, in her later book *Théorie et pratique du théâtre. Au delà des limites* (2011), and stated that the emergence and the expansion of performance marked the end of a certain theatrical genre: dramatic theatre<sup>7</sup>. To describe this turning point, theatre scholars such as herself, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Elinor Fuchs, Philip Auslander, among others, as well as artists, developed the term 'performance' "in a dialectical relationship to theatre". As Marvin Carlson put it, "the opposition was usually based on some variation of theater's association with semiotics and formal structures, and that of performance with the inchoate, still uncoded material of life itself"<sup>8</sup>. It is this dichotomy which is present in Marina Abramovic's typical way of dividing both disciplines, performance and theatre:

"To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. Theatre is fake...  
The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real.

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<sup>6</sup> Josette Féral, "Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified", *Modern Drama*, 25, no 1 (1982):170-181. (1982), 177.

<sup>7</sup> Josette Féral, *Théorie et pratique du théâtre. Au delà des limites*, (Montpellier: L'Entretemps, 2011), 110

<sup>8</sup> Marvin Carlson, "The Resistance to Theatricality", *SubStance*, 31, No. 2/3, Issue 98/99: Special Issue: *Theatricality*, (2002): 242.

Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real.”<sup>9</sup>

However, with postmodernist influence in experimental theatre in the 1970’s and 80’s, such opposition progressively became less antagonistic. Josette Féral started using the expression ‘performative theatre’ to name new ideas of theatre that were emerging at the turn of the century, thus signaling a juxtaposition of opposite terms: theatre and performance<sup>10</sup>. Hans-Thies Lehmann, in *Postdramatic Theatre*, also mentioned a “changed conception of the performance text”:

“postdramatic theatre is not simply a new kind of text of staging – and even less a new type of theatre text, but rather a type of sign usage in the theatre that turns both of these levels of theatre upside down through the structurally changed quality of the performance text: it becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information.”<sup>11</sup>

The “end of illusion”, “the death of the character”<sup>12</sup> make theatre the equal of life (the blood is real) and it is in that sense that it has absorbed postmodern theory and has let itself be invaded by performance art. The

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<sup>9</sup> O’Hagan, 2010, “Interview: Marina Abramovic”, *The Guardian*, 3 Oct. (2010): [<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist>]

<sup>10</sup> ‘La performativité y apparaît comme synonyme de fluidité, d’instabilité, d’ouverture du champ des possibles, se situant entre reconnaissance et ambiguïté des significations. Elle est donc multisignifiante et plurielle, et va à l’encontre de l’Un pour faire émerger le Pluriel. L’idée récurrente véhiculée par la notion est bien celle d’ambiguïté des flux de sens, d’instabilité, de glissement des formes et des significations.’ (Féral, 2013: 212).

[Performativity appears as a synonym for fluidity, instability, broadening horizons, situated somewhere between the identification and ambiguities of meanings. Therefore, it is multi-signifying and plural, and goes against the idea of One to reveal the Many. The recurring idea conveyed by this notion is the ambiguity in the multitude of meanings, instability, and shifting forms.]

<sup>11</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, (London / New York: Routledge, 2006), 85.

<sup>12</sup> Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character. Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (Bloomington/ Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996).

non-self lost its place in experimental theatre, and the question of illusion and reality disappears if all reality is a fiction: "performance is the only reality"<sup>13</sup>.

In her 1983 article "The End of the Character""", when describing Lee Breuer's trilogy *Animations*, Elinor Fuchs claimed that "if the 'I' is everywhere, then it is nowhere."<sup>14</sup> With these words, Fuchs draw an equivalence between what was happening to the self in experimental theatre and in postmodern philosophy. The similarity with Diderot's previously quoted dictum – "it is because he [the actor] is nothing that he is before all everything" – deserves some attention.

The actor's nothingness, according to those who interpreted Keyla Brasil's action as an 'invasion' of the stage, is to be attained through a process or practice that enhances the actor's skills. Such skills can be trained. One forgets who one is in order to be more capable of representing or becoming the non-self. On the other hand, Fuchs described the disappearance of the metaphysical self and the appearance of a fragmentary identity and an 'accreted self' on stage. The actor on stage, according to Fuchs, does not embody a concealed duplicity but rather a conspicuous multiplicity. In her analyses of certain performances, she claimed that the actors never lose themselves, because there is nothing to be lost. What is constituent of the actor's self is its multiplicity and not a protean virtuosity to become the non-self. In her understanding, nothing and everything, just like everywhere and nowhere, are to be understood as synonyms, or, as Fuchs herself put it, "obverse sides of a single coin"<sup>15</sup>.

One could say that different rules apply to postmodern theatre and to dramatic theatre and that Diderot's *The Paradox of the Actor* is no longer relevant to postdramatic experiments. We are however convinced that the actor in dramatic theatre and postdramatic theatre is not so different. The difference stands rather in how our considerations of the self influence our reading of Diderot, just like they influence our interpretation of Keyla Brasil's action. The self/non-self model has been used to think about the actor

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<sup>13</sup> Fuchs, *The Death of Character...*, 175.

<sup>14</sup> Fuchs, *The Death of Character...*, 173.

<sup>15</sup> Fuchs, *The Death of Character...*, 173.

both in dramatic and postdramatic theatre, helping us distinguish between its representations as well as between different ideas of the actor. However, if we put aside this grid of interpretation, we may find out that actors in dramatic and postdramatic theatre are ontologically the same.

In fact, as shown, Diderot's description of the actor is very much in tune with Elinor Fuchs' description of the performer in Lee Breuer's work. If it is true that the model of the self/non-self has been used to read Diderot's *The Paradox of the Actor*, it should also be noticed that we are not tied to such interpretation, which might explain why Diderot's thoughts on the actor have been used both by those who cannot let go of illusion and representation in theatre (the actor is nothing), as well as by those who describe and assert a performative turn in theatre (the actor is nowhere).

We would therefore like to show, with the help of a postmodern reception of the *Paradox of the Actor* by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and, more recently, by Eyal Peretz, how Diderot opened up the possibility for a different approach to the question of the self, one that comes from theatre but is not confined to its context. Being nothing does not necessarily mean, as those who defend the illusion in theatre think it does, that the actor is deprived of subjectivity. It can also mean that subjectivity is not to be confined to an idea of a self-same self based on the individual and the opposition with the other, the non-self.

### *Diderot and the paradox of the actor*

The reception and readings of Diderot's famous text can be divided in two thematic fields: the specifically theatrical and the broader philosophical (ontological). This means that the 'actor' in *The Paradox of the Actor* is both viewed as a theatrical figure, a profession specific to theatre and the performing arts, as well as an idea or representation of subjectivity and the question of the self, and in that line as a 'new kind of thinker', as Eyal Peretz puts it in *Dramatic Experiments*, his book on Diderot. We will be mostly concerned here with the second of these approaches, although, as I have previously shown, if we consider theatre to be the equal of life, I will necessarily handle both.



Let us then focus, first of all, on Diderot's statement that 'it is because he [the actor] is nothing that he is before all everything'. Such allegation is commonly understood in the continuation of the platonic discussion around the concept of *mimesis*. According to Plato, the mimeticians are no one, they are mask and hypocrisy, and as such they are unassignable and unidentifiable. The miming of human action is targeted. Actors are mere appearances, they do not speak in their own name, they are only accountable for a system of indirect presentation that allows for a speech without responsibility.

In that line, Diderot's actor is devoid of a self, of a will and identity, of desire and feeling, thus living as a sort of puppet on stage who represents the other which she is not: the non-self. Diderot insisted in the paradox: the less the actor feels, the more the audience feels what the actor is not feeling. This means that the actor cannot 'identify' with the character, i.e., feel what the character is feeling, live what the character is living, but rather preserve the ability to control the emotions, an ability that is only achievable by those who have the skill of being insensible. As Diderot put it:

C'est qu'il s'écoute au moment où il vous trouble, et que tout son talent consiste à non pas sentir, comme vous le supposez, mais à rendre si scrupuleusement les signes extérieurs du sentiment, que vous vous y trompiez.<sup>16</sup>

[At the very moment when he touches your heart he is listening to his own voice; his talent depends not, as you think, upon feeling, but upon rendering so scrupulously the outward signs of feeling, that you fall into the trap.]

The actor is a trickster and the best trickster, because she is able to imitate feelings. The actor simulates authenticity itself, that which we hold as the core of the self, becoming the epitome of illusion. The capacity to be insensible is, in this reading of Diderot, the capacity not to be yourself.

This view of the actor as someone who is devoid of 'character' is what Plato and those that borrow his terms condemned in theatre and the actor. It is also the thinking that is implied in Marina Abramovic's description of

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<sup>16</sup> Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres. Tome IV...*, 1384.

theatre's fakeness and even of Michael Fried's famous description of minimalist art as something which is inexhaustible 'not because of any fullness ... but because there is nothing there to exhaust.' (Fried, 1998: 166)

However, there is an interesting possible twist in the interpretation of Diderot's actor that should not be eluded. Lacoue-Labarthe, in his 1982 essay, 'Diderot: paradox and mimesis', published in *Typography* (1989), pointed out to this passage in Diderot's essay, describing it as the search for a remedy for mimesis in mimesis (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989: 266):

On a dit que les comédiens n'avaient aucun caractère, parce qu'en les jouant tous ils perdaient celui que la nature leur avait donné; qu'ils devenaient faux, comme le médecin, le chirurgien et le boucher deviennent durs. Je crois qu'on a pris la cause pour l'effet, et qu'ils ne sont propres à les jouer tous que parce qu'ils n'en ont point.<sup>17</sup>

[It has been said that actors have no character, because in playing all characters they lose that which nature gave them, and they become false just as the doctor, the surgeon, and the butcher, become hardened. I fancy that here the cause is confounded with the effect and that they are fit to play all characters because they have none.]

Lacoue-Labarthe developed a reading of *The Paradox of the Actor* that found in it the germ for the reversal of the metaphysical representation of the self as "constant and self-same"<sup>18</sup> He underlines the fact that the actor does not lose, with his acting, that which nature gave her (the self), because, according to Diderot, the actor does not become something, since she already is that something: which is no one. The actor's self *is* the non-self and does not *become* the non-self.

This distinction will be important for Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of the paradox. He regarded Diderot's theatrical mimesis as a model for general mimesis and the actor as the model for a "subjectless subject" or "a subject that is a nonsubject", one who has the "gift of impropriety, ... the gift of nothing", which Lacoue-Labarthe also called a 'poetic gift', i.e., 'the gift of mimesis':

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<sup>17</sup> Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres. Tome IV...*, 1407

<sup>18</sup> Eyal Peretz, *Dramatic Experiments. Life According to Diderot*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2013), 118

“By this I mean nature’s gift of itself, not as something already there, or already present – ‘nature’, as one would have said at the time – but more essentially, as pure and ungraspable poesis (in withdrawal, and always withdrawn in its presence): a productive or formative force, energy in the strict sense, the perpetual movement of presentation. ...”<sup>19</sup>

Lacoue-Labarthe is reading Diderot’s description of the actor as a self that acts and of ‘nature’ as the result of such activity and activation. The actor’s ‘gift’ is an attempt to ‘convert’ mimesis or to master the paradox of mimesis against passive mimesis<sup>20</sup>. In that sense, the actor, as Eyal Peretz described it, “occupies an uncanny space that is internal or immanent to the world and yet not exactly of it or in it”<sup>21</sup>.

Peretz acknowledged that his reading of the *Paradox* is indebted to Lacoue-Labarthe’s, although the French critic still associated Diderot’s self ‘with the logic of possession’ that characterizes metaphysics. For Peretz, however, Diderot is on to something much more profound here.

“It is not a question of opposing a non-metaphysical dimension of originary dispossession with a metaphysical desire for self-possession, but rather of finding a third dimension, a certain insensible alienation to be discovered at the heart of the logic of an originary madness, the place where it is as if this madness is revealed to itself in its own showing, revealed to itself in the theatrical image.”<sup>22</sup>

Peretz characterized Diderot’s actor in his chapter on *The Paradox of the Actor*, which is part of the book *Dramatic Experiments. Life According to Diderot*, as a reversal of the “metaphysical rejection of the actor as the most inconstant figure”<sup>23</sup>. In that sense, Peretz followed Lacoue-Labarthe’s reading of Diderot. However, Peretz also focused on the actor’s scopophilic tendencies, when he described the actor as a self who has “the power and wisdom of the one who

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<sup>19</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, (1989), *Typography. Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1986), 259

<sup>20</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography. Mimesis...*, 265

<sup>21</sup> Eyal Peretz, *Dramatic Experiments...*, 121.

<sup>22</sup> Eyal Peretz, *Dramatic Experiments...*, 234.

<sup>23</sup> Eyal Peretz, *Dramatic Experiments...*, 118

knows how to activate a fundamental internal excess and non-identity"<sup>24</sup>. Such knowledge derives from the "context of a complex optical situation" offered by theatre as "the realm in which the self activates its most properly, if disappropriating, power". Indeed, this optical situation comprises the relations (thus its complexity) between the actor and himself as well as between the actor and the audience, the actor and those she imitates or "the actor and the phantom".<sup>25</sup>

This optical context interferes with the traditional coupling of world and stage. According to Peretz, the actor is "the one occupying the position of a spectator in relation to those acting in the world, which he watches, and out of those watching he creates his characters." This '*immanent position of spectatorship*' which is "internal to the world's very constitution" means that actors are "ncanny creatures, occupying the position of world-spectators" who "have their own arena of acting" (the theatrical stage), "while the acting world, the world that was watched, now acquires itself a position of spectatorship, watching those on the theatrical stage.' The complexity of such optical situation can be summarized in the reversibility of those who look and those who are being observed, which is why 'in the theater, the world watches its own being watched'<sup>26</sup>.

What interests us in this reading of *The Paradox of the Actor* is the juxtaposition of the coupling world and stage. The possibility of the reversal of both realities (the world and the stage) is part of the reversibility of subject and object, the self and the non-self, the one who observes and the one who is being observed. The optical complexity Peretz identifies in theatre is constituent of the figure of inconstancy that the actor (and the self) is. The reversibility of world and stage makes both part of the same reality (of the same world), just as the reversibility of actor and spectator implies that they are, ontologically speaking, identical subjects characterized by accumulation and complexity.

Peretz's and Lacoue-Labarthe's interpretations of the actor as a subject that emerges from Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor* focus on an alternative to the self-same subject that is commonly regarded as the metaphysical self. It is this metaphysical subject that those who criticize Keyla Brasil's action as trying to put an end to theatre are afraid of losing.

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<sup>24</sup> Eyal Peretz, *Dramatic Experiments...*,118

<sup>25</sup> Eyal Peretz, *Dramatic Experiments...*,119-120.

<sup>26</sup> Eyal Peretz, *Dramatic Experiments...*,121-122.

If one sees in Keyla Brasil's 'invasion' of the stage a confusion between the self and the non-self, in the sense that Keyla Brasil wants the self to be the non-self, what happens if we regard it as an action against the logic of possession? Wouldn't that action rather be about someone claiming the complexity of the self, the reversibility of subject and object, world and stage, indeed the right to a subjectless subject, to Lacoue-Labarthe's poetic gift or to what Eyal Peretz regards as a metamorphosis, namely, "the transformation of the world's suffering into the possibility given by the staged phantom/image to re-open the world out of its unidentifiable excess, out of that which is beyond identity"<sup>27</sup> ?

This means that the actor is not a subject who has lost her identity as well as the ability to be truthful or to separate reality and fiction, but rather someone who is beyond such descriptions of the self. This meaning is also extensible to theatre as a genre, which is why Keyla Brasil was accused of putting at risk theatre's identity just as transgender persons are often accused of putting at risk the identity of the human being. The common argument that opposes such accusations usually recurs to the fact that transgender persons are not destroying identity but rather expanding its realm, by adding identities. However, we believe that Keyla Brasil is not creating other identities nor simply claiming for the visibility and presence of certain identities on stage, but rather working with an idea of the self that is beyond identity.

We would thus like to conclude by attempting to describe what a self beyond identity might be, adding to this discussion a vocabulary which has been conveyed by recent biological studies concerning the idea of individual. We are convinced that these descriptions and vocabulary that emerge from the studies of microbiologist Lynn Margulies in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, will allow us to cast a new light not only on Diderot's idea of the actor but also on Keyla Brasil's action, taking us a step further in Lacoue-Labarthe's and Peretz's considerations on the self and the actor.

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<sup>27</sup> Eyal Peretz, *Dramatic Experiments...*, 133.

### *The self as continuity*

Since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but particularly in the last two decades of this century, a new paradigm for biology and its view on the self is being argued. Some, like Scott Gilbert, call it an ecological approach, meaning the shift from a molecular-centered science towards ecological considerations, understood in terms of collective behaviors and exchange relationships. Interests move from discerning mechanisms of insularity to those concerned with how the organism becomes an integrated constituent of a larger community.<sup>28</sup>

"We have never been individuals" is one of the slogans for such biological descriptions, and the word 'holobiont' is being used to describe organisms in order to acknowledge the 'complex consortia' that "def[ies] any singular definition of organismal individuals as monogenomic agents"<sup>29</sup>.

To understand the practical implications, we can shortly look at the branch of immunology where the model of the self/non-self has been hegemonic since the 1940's (albeit Russian zoologist, microbiologist and Nobel prize winner Metchnikov (1845-1916) is frequently quoted as the founder of such model in immunology) and is currently being questioned as a consequence of microbiological discoveries that were once impossible to observe. According to the self/non-self model any element which is foreign (non-self) to an organism will trigger an immune reaction if introduced to it, whereas endogenous elements (self) do not, in normal circumstances, induce an immune reaction<sup>30</sup>. Some scientists have called attention to the symbiotic relations established among different organisms that require a different description that encompasses a 'notion of continuity' as Pradeau and Carosella put it, "the metaphysical deflation from a definition of identity based on substance (identity-substance) to a definition of identity based on continuity (identity-continuity)"<sup>31</sup>. This deflation from *self* to continuity changes our

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<sup>28</sup> Scott Gilbert, Albert I Tauber, "Rethinking Individuality: The Dialectics of the Holobiont" *Biology and Philosophy* 31, (2016): 839-853.

<sup>29</sup> Scott Gilbert, Albert I Tauber, "Rethinking Individuality ...", 840

<sup>30</sup> T. Pradeau, E.D Carosella, "The Self Model and the Conception of Biological Identity in Immunology", *Biology and Philosophy* 21 (2006): 235.

<sup>31</sup> T. Pradeau, E.D Carosella, "The Self Model...", 245.

description of immunity, since it no longer merely means the guarding of “the body against other hostile organisms in the environment; it also mediates the body’s participation in a community of ‘others’ that contribute to its welfare”<sup>32</sup>.

These biological descriptions of the self, if viewed in conjunction with what Peretz and Lacoue-Labarthe read in Diderot, lead us to an idea of the self that not only opens itself to reversibility but, more importantly and in a more radical approach, operate outside or *beyond* such system of signification, namely the one that either allows for the separation between the self and the non-self or for its ventures of reversibility. The complex interactions that constitute such a conception give rise to an optical complexity that is easily extendable to other realities outside theatre or the stage. In continuity there is no coupling between the stage and the world or between the self and the other.

Those who regard Keyla Brasil’s action as the ‘invasion’ of the stage and the fiction are hermeneutically resorting to the self/non-self model. There is, for these people, a clear distinction between a character and a person based on an idea of bounded individualism, just like there is a distinction between the stage and the world. In classical immunological terms, Keyla Brasil is the non-self, the foreign element to the performance, representative of the (political) reality, who is destroying the illusion, thus killing the performance.

Stanley Cavell famously describes the joke of the ‘Southern yokel’ who rushes to the stage to save Desdemona from Othello. The joke depends upon the fact that this spectator “thinks something is really happening, whereas nothing is really happening. It’s play acting”, Cavell adds<sup>33</sup>. However, if you can say that there are two women on stage (the actress and Desdemona, the self and the non-self), you can also say, beyond such logic, that they are in continuity, and that by jumping on stage, the Southern yokel is actually preventing a killing, just like Keyla Brasil is preventing her own killing.

I am also thinking here of what Keyla Brasil said while on stage, namely that in the previous week she had almost been killed while prostituting herself to make a living. If we acknowledge the continuity of such narrative with that

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<sup>32</sup> Scott Gilbert, Albert I Tauber, “Rethinking Individuality ...”, 333

<sup>33</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say. A Book of Essays*, (Cambridge University Press, 1976), 328

of the performance she ‘interrupted’, we expand the hermeneutical possibilities of Brasil’s action and performance. This performer does not consider what is happening on stage as something other or foreign, apart from hers and the audience’s world, and it is for that reason that she can be part of the fiction and claim her presence on stage beyond the frame provided by the couple fictional/real. I am actually convinced that Keyla Brasil did not interrupt a performance, but that she rather continued it, changed it, interfered in it, just like the performance was itself continuing the life of the ‘world-spectators’.

The nothingness that Lacoue-Labarthe finds in the actor’s self, the nothing that allows one to be everything, according to Diderot, is what Keyla Brasil is calling for as she goes on stage. The theatre and the performers, who are still stuck to the metaphysical self, think she is interrupting the performance whereas she believes, following her idea of continuity, that the “whole dear notion of one’s own Self – marvelous, old free-willed, free-enterprising, autonomous, independent, isolated island of a Self – is a myth.”<sup>34</sup> Keyla Brasil is claiming a self that is continuous, equal to life and equal to theatre, beyond the dichotomy which is constitutive of the majority of interpretations of her action.

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<sup>34</sup> Scott Gilbert, Jan Sapp, Albert I Tauber, “A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals”, *The quarterly Review of Biology*, 86, no 4, (2012): 334.



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