

Article

After the Wave, the Flood? Finding a New Autonomy and Relation to Work

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Abstract: How do changes in the perception of the arts stemming from activism, government policies, precarity and the ongoing crises unfolding in the world affect the autonomy of the artist? In this article, I analyse three cases of young and emerging theatre makers in Flanders and Brussels that each deal with the economic, social precarity of the arts, as well as the general precarious state of the world. Camping Sunset, Ne Mosquito Pas, and Anna Franziska Jäger and Nathan Ooms each explore new ways of maintaining autonomy, be it by collective collaboration, creating a network and an aesthetics of failures and cynicism or a performance of overpositivity and a revaluation of the comic. My claim is that these artists find autonomy in the ‘making’ of a work itself, placing poetics back at heart of artistic work instead of performance. I argue that their poetics can be described as a *poetics of inoperativity* (Agamben), which places resistance and criticality on the level of making theatre and performance itself instead of making large societal claims.

Keywords: performing arts; Belgium; negativity; autonomy; collective; Giorgio Agamben; poetics; inoperativity



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1. Introduction: What Happened to Autonomy?

In 2021, Belgian philosopher Stephan Symons wrote a pertinent text on how the arts respond to the destructive consequences of the ongoing ecological catastrophe. Instead of an artwork made by an artist that transcends the plain reality or an artwork that seeks to find potentialities in the destruction, he writes, “we need artistic expressions of the tremendous sense of impossibility that marks the current era. A foremost characteristic of today’s world, it seems, is that we are confronted with events and evolutions that can in no way be reconnected to any hope for improvement” (Symons 2021). Symons presents artists like painter Philippe Vandenberg and writer Robert Walser and their destructive yet healing work as examples of such negative aesthetics. What particularly interests me here is the gesture of combining this negativity with a poetic act—poetic in the sense of *poiesis*, of ‘making’. The combination of negativity and creativity responds to an important question in times of durational crises: how do artists make work today, and what is the place of this work in their lives and worlds? With this question as the guiding line, in this article, I explore several practices by young and emerging theatre, dance and performance artists in the Flemish and Brussels scenes.

In Flanders and Brussels, the world stage affected by ecocatastrophe, war and geopolitical tensions, as well as a technology-driven neoliberal economy, is complemented by precarity and politics in the local scene. A reform of the Flemish arts decree, which will take its effect from 2023, causes, at the moment of writing (Spring 2022), a lot of insecurity, as its consequences remain unsure. This art decree arranges the funding of individual artists, theatre, dance and music companies, visual arts organizations, theatres and the opera but also independent management bureaus and spaces for development and residencies. In a nutshell, it is the backbone for a whole arts landscape, ranging from the smallest ‘unit’, the individual artist, to the largest units, the so-called Flemish arts institutions and from

the early development and creation of work to its presentation to an audience. Lauded abroad as an instrument that safeguards an independent arts scene with considerable space for experiment and an artist-oriented field, this decree has now been changed. In a move that at once guarantees longer-term security about funds in exchange for more political interference for the bigger institutions, such as city theatres, and that seeks to weaken the artistic civil society made up of companies and smaller arts organizations, the Flemish government, run by a conservative nationalist party (N-VA, New Flemish Alliance) and with a minister of culture from that same party, seeks to further push their at once neoliberal and conservative (i.e., oriented toward a so-called 'Flemish' identity) agenda. The shift of focus toward larger institutions will potentially weaken the independence and viability of more experimental work made outside of the big theatres. The precarious individual artist, choreographer or theatre maker is more under threat than usual, and a field that already feels crowded because of a large group of artists that needs to be supported by a relatively moderate arts budget now finds itself under high pressure. The issue of changing national and social funding policies has a considerable impact on the autonomy of artists and "the way they can manage economic and artistic precarities" (Van Assche and Laermans 2022). It is precisely this socioeconomic autonomy that was the outcome of the renewal of funding policies throughout the 1980s and 1990s and that made the 'independent scene', with its artistic autonomy, the mainstream as opposed to the big city and commercial theatres, as it is, for example, in Germany or France. This makes the Flemish and Brussels performing arts scene (theatre, dance and performance) an interesting context to discuss autonomy and the ways in which it is threatened but also the ways in which artists develop their poetics in response to the pressure.

A shifting view of the arts and the intrinsic value of artistic practices adds to these macro problems. Autonomy in the arts, as Rudi Laermans writes, is not only something made possible and hence dependent on political, economic and educational levels but also on symbolic capital and "the autonomization of artistic communication" (Laermans 2015). Activist tendencies in the arts, with theatre houses wanting to prove their relevance by claiming themes relating to gender, race, decolonization and other hot topics, such as care and ecology, question this autonomy and risk reducing art works to elements in a PR machine. This tokenization of artists and artworks tends to affirm a vision of art that was long resisted in the arts field. Many neoliberal and populist ministers of culture have sought to tie subsidies to measurable impact in terms of audience numbers or social or economic return, hence denying the value of art as such. The desire to act is in itself not misguided, and seeing the state of the world, the urge to stand on the barricades, is understandable and commendable. However, the reduction of artwork to these goals makes art into a means to an end outside of art, with a return to more conventional forms of representation. This betrays a deep doubt with respect to the status and use of making, showing and watching art. It appears that Bojana Kunst's statement is true: when the intertwinement of art and capitalism seems inevitable and when the arts hence appear to be complicit in systems of repression, this can lead to a pessimism, which in turn leads to a "hatred toward art" (Kunst 2015, p. 150).

Clearly, it becomes increasingly difficult to deny art's dependence on macro contexts, such as funding or its inevitable resonance with geopolitical and ecological issues. Nor does it remain feasible to deny "the symbolic economy regulating all autonomous fields of cultural production" (Laermans 2015), as many critics of Eurocentrism, patriarchy and whiteness have shown. For Laermans, it is precisely this double denial that is exemplary of art's autonomy. Yet, what if this is no longer tenable? What is the space for an artwork critical of autonomy and that yet wants to exist *as* artwork, with a medium-specific awareness and dramaturgy, what with art as an autonomous experiment with its own value? After the Flemish wave of the 1980s that enabled artists such as Anne Teresa De Keersmaker, Jan Lauwers or TgSTAN to form autonomous, sustainable theatre and dance companies, the autonomy of artists and artworks is challenged. Van Assche and Laermans rightly claim that managing economic risks and social networks thwarts "artistic risk-taking or

true autonomy" (2022). Activist tendencies and global crisis add to the complexity of the current situation. Can we find a new autonomy, a position that re-evaluates the position of the artist and the work of art?

In this text, I will highlight a number of practices I encountered during the past year (2021), most of them in some way related to drama or dance departments in Flemish schools of art. They present (new) modes of organization and seek to rethink the way artists make and relate to their work. The cases that are discussed are part of a larger tendency to, on the one hand, move beyond deconstructive gestures and seek to propose a way forward, however modest. On the other hand, they avoid falling into un-nuanced action and stay critical towards aspects of 'doing', 'production' and 'performance'. As the late dramaturge Marianne van Kerkhoven wrote, "the road is part of the destination" (Van Kerkhoven 1994, my translation); hence, the creation context is key to the outcome. New forms of autonomy, I will argue, will have to be found in a poetics that comprises both aesthetics of making art and the production process. By looking into how these artists organize themselves, develop contexts for performances and reflect on performance itself, I try to discern ways for the arts to steer away from their being paradigmatic for a post-Fordist economy (e.g., Kunst 2015). I will argue that the work of these emerging artists can be read as instances of 'inoperativity' and 'impotentiality', two related concepts by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben that—as do the artists discussed here—among other things, aim to break the power of a neoliberal system of competition, self-realization and individualism, of infinite growth and continuous performance. Whereas impotentiality emphasises the ability not to do something that is, for Agamben, an intrinsic aspect of his conception of potentiality and hence includes negativity in each possibility (Agamben 1999), inoperativity is a suspended state of being, a deactivation while in action, a stillness while in motion.

2. Re-Ensemble: Camping Sunset

In 2018, Sara De Roo, actress and former member of the theatre collective TgSTAN and current co-coordinator of the acting department at the Royal Conservatoire Antwerp, was invited to bring the annual state of the union that opens the Flemish theatre season during the Flemish Theatre Festival.¹ One of her pleas was to enable theatre pieces to be programmed for longer periods, as actors need to grow together with the piece in relation to an audience. They need to be able to 'make flying hours' in order to build experience. Her plea coincided with the dissolution of the last ensemble in the Flemish theatre field (at the Ghent City Theatre). In recent decades, the theatre ensembles disappeared gradually in Flanders because of aesthetic and political evolutions towards a more autonomous artist and arts field. In a deeply postdramatic field with flexible, project-based collaborations, the ensemble no longer sufficiently matched the aesthetics and modes of production of many Flemish theatre makers. At least, that was what many thought; the side effects of this tendency call for some remediation. The end of the ensemble symbolized the transition towards a more flexible field with ad hoc collaborations for each creation and a circuit in which tour dates are scattered and reduced. With Bojana Kunst's remarks on the proximity between art and capitalism in mind, it may be no wonder that the flexibilization of the performing arts field to the benefit of the autonomous artist is an easy prey to neoliberal policies and competition. However, bringing the ensemble (as a token of a more stable working environment) back to life would come with the risk of returning to more conservative or populist theatre forms. This could unintentionally echo artistic preferences coming from more conservative and populist political corners. Yet, the past years have seen a return to new forms of ensembles and a renewed attention for collective working structures. These are a reaction to the artistic questions on acting raised by De Roo but also to issues of collaboration and cross-disciplinarity, as well as political and socioeconomic challenges. They nearly all operate with a desire for an ethics of inclusion and sustainability, as well as a socioeconomic vision of support for young artists, going against the precarity of the entrepreneurial self of the individual artist.

In the summer of 2019, heading the call of De Roo's statement² and weary of the lack of opportunities to perform upon entering the professional theatre field, a group of just-graduated drama students of KASK—School of Arts initiated 'Camping Sunset'. The setup was as simple as it was challenging. After two weeks of rehearsals at a makeshift campsite with an open-air stage, they would perform every evening for three weeks, allowing the piece, actors and acting choices to evolve. With one ticket, the audience could come back for another evening, inviting the spectators to follow the actors' journey and to look at 'how' they performed, perhaps more than 'what' they performed (*Gorky's Summerfolk*). One actor, Mitch Van Landegem, for example, playing the poetess Kaljerija, wrote a new poem every day, which put extra tension on how he would perform each evening. I remember that during the second evening I attended the show, the balance between the characters had shifted, as well as my own way of looking—less focused on the narrative and more attentive to performers' choices. The two subsequent iterations of *Camping Sunset* (*Happiness*, after Tod Solondz' film in 2020, and *Ten Oorlog*, after Tom Lanoye's take on Shakespeare's plays of the War of Roses in 2021) may have shown, however, that artistically, the concept is limited precisely because of the way it is organized. It leaves little time for dramaturgical and conceptual foundational work, and the emphasis on playing with an ensemble in which each performer needs to get space and time makes sharp choices a lesser priority. The question remains as to whether the development of the actors is not limited to problem solving by 'just playing' instead of by creating a solid base that can evolve afterwards. The roughness of the ongoing work of the performances of the *Camping Sunset* crew is a consequence of the collective energy of the group moving forward through a kamikaze series of shows. With Symons' search for how to incorporate negativity in mind, what lacks here are the restraint, the implicit and the refusal that might also protect the group from crash-and-burn dynamics.

The political gesture is clear, though, and makes at least a strong case for self-organization. In Flanders, *Camping Sunset* put acting and collaboration, as a theme, back on the artistic agenda for young theatre makers and actors. This also generated attention for other existing collectives (such as K.A.K.—Koekelbergse Alliantie voor Knutselaars, a group with origins in the Brussels-based theatre school RITCS, or the multidisciplinary Antwerp-based collective Osei Bantu) and inspired other graduating generations of acting students to 'collectivize' as well (e.g., HERMAN, a group of acting students from the Royal Conservatoire Antwerp, or Het werktoneel, also stemming from KASK). Resonating with other forms of assembly, these collaborations claim visibility in the face of shared precarity (Butler 2015) as young, emerging, sometimes autodidact, alternatively working artists. The movement towards developing new forms of collaboration in the face of the negativity of the present is important and relevant. The question then is how to avoid overemphasizing potentiality, which would eventually lead to the pressure of having to produce without the space to reflect, as we have seen with *Camping Sunset*.

3. Towards a Cynical Poetics of Inoperativity: Ne Mosquito Pas

A more complex and artistically innovative form of collaboration is Ne Mosquito Pas, an initiative founded in 2019 by performing artist Simon Van Schuylenberg. Self-described as a *failing performing arts platform* and an *experiment in alternative production methods* but also as a *reality show of the cultural sector* (Van Schuylenberg 2021), Ne Mosquito Pas is another response to the precarity caused by neoliberal and post-Fordist working conditions and poetics in the arts. If a Fordist economy was centred on making production processes more efficient in factories by organizing workers' bodies, a post-Fordist economy makes subjectivity and creativity itself its core products. In the arts, we see this in the shift away from the artwork as an independent product and from the stability of the ensemble and the repertoire towards the artist and process as focal points and toward increasing flexibility and project-based work. Van Assche and Laermans refer to this as "the bohemian work ethic", in which "bohemian values such as autonomy, artistic pleasure, lifelong learning,

self-development and self-realization compensate for the multifaceted precarious working conditions and insecure future prospects” (Van Assche and Laermans 2022).

Evenings organized under the banner of Ne Mosquito Pas are comprised of a number of short solos by varying combinations of artists. The central notion is that of failure. The solos are presented as ‘failed scenes’ or ‘deleted scenes’ or they deal, in other ways, with forms of professional, artistic, personal, emotional or ethical failure. They show what artists usually prefer not to show or what is deemed bad taste or to be inconsistent. The Ne Mosquito Pas core team, comprised out of Schuylenberg, Rosie Sommers, Anna Franziska Jäger, Nathan Ooms and Micha Barat Goldberg, shares their practice via workshops in which they work on the common principles of the platform. The network of artists performing in the Ne Mosquito Pas evenings has, in this way, brought forth a family of more than forty artists and counting. This platform makes visible a portion of the large number of mostly young and independent artists living and/or working in Brussels, whose work can be read from the perspective of the complicated local and global conditions described above.

Across the various Ne Mosquito Pas evenings I attended, there were solos on a potentially abusive relationship between a mentor and a pupil, a solo on a perhaps all too sentimental experience of feeling good and powerful as a female artist and an account of how one dancer’s dream career of joining a famous Flemish choreographer’s company in Antwerp was thwarted by the choreographer’s alleged involvement in a sexual and power abuse scandal. There was also a scene in which a queer real estate agent imposes his acting ambitions on potential buyers, and various solos had stories of immigration because of artistic ambitions that did not lead to employment or creative opportunities because of the artists’ poetics not matching those currently *en vogue*.

These scenes are presented on an informal stage, a square area with the audience seated at the adjacent sides of the square. The sober scenography consists, time and again, of a picket fence with the phrase *If you don’t succeed at first maybe failure is your style* attached to it and a mat printed with a mosaic. Artists might bring attributes and music, but the overall aesthetic remains DIY. Ne Mosquito Pas is interesting both on the level of its organization and poetics. As a platform, it aims to be inclusive and yet consistent by sharing the practice of short, personal solos via workshops. Additionally, in terms of presentation, it has an original approach. During the summertime, they tour ‘in Brussels’, in its many cultural and community centres, in its performing arts workspaces and in other underground and public spaces. That way, they allow as many performers as possible to present their ‘failures’ and remain relatively independent from the conventional arts circuit. Often, performances are preceded by a week of workshops in which new solos are developed, maintaining a direct line between ‘making’ and ‘showing’. The atmosphere is open and relaxed, full of self-relativization and jokes, yet sincere and not for granted.

That is because artistically, there is something at stake. All of the solos have a strong relation to things that did not happen, to letting go or having to let go of ambitions. There is a sense of solitude and isolation and of mourning ambitions and desires. It is about what these artists did *not* do—although they are now sharing these scenes, thoughts or stories with an audience. Remarkably, these so-called *clandestine* scenes are perhaps more intimate than the scenes and work they did *do*. This is not failure as suffering nor as an aesthetic to present a melancholic yet sympathetic image of the flawed human being. This is failure as a basis for a more profound poetic—as in *poiesis*, the making of something—gesture that suggests a way to *make with* the negativities that are part of (artistic) life.

This gesture of making with the negativities of our times resonate with the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and its confinements and continuous uncertainty. However, there is more to it. On a more philosophical level, these scenes are a transformation of an impossibility into an impotentiality. They perform an artistic gesture that transforms an *inability* into an *ability not to* by embracing failure as a form of refusal to the drive for success. This is not a search for potentiality in the negative but, rather, enabling a different relation to negativity in the making of a work. In this way, the evenings and poetics of Ne

Mosquito Pas are a practice that not only resonates with Symons' call for an art without hope; they go a step further than Symons in suggesting a poetics of impotentiality that connects and even enables the practice of making and performing *with* negativity—how else could an impossibility lead to an act of making?

Impotentiality is a key term in the work of philosopher Giorgio Agamben and his search to redefine action and gestures outside of the spheres of oppressive power and capitalist spectacle. It is a notion that travels throughout his oeuvre, whether it aims to critically upend state power, the power of language, the capture of movement and attention by media apparatuses or the creation of a work of art. In many essays and books, he has redefined potentiality as always implying an impotentiality, drawing on the work of Aristotle. The ability to do is, in potentiality, always accompanied by the ability not to: "all potentiality is impotentiality". Moreover, for Agamben, it is essential to human beings, as "human beings are the animals who are capable of their own impotentiality" (Agamben 1999). Potentiality, in this sense, stands opposed to impossibility and to necessity (having to, it cannot be otherwise). This is the resisting element in art; it is key to "a poetics of inoperativity" (Agamben 2019), a making with impotentiality as a way of making with negativity.

The notion of inoperativity implies a relation to an *opus*, a work. Hence, in order to develop a poetics of impotentiality or inoperativity, one needs a relation to a work. Here, we come back to the question of precarity as a relation to work—both as in labour and as in the performance as a product of that labour. Some of the Ne Mosquito Pas solos suggest a disillusion with the performing arts scene, with making performance—perhaps even, as Kunst wrote, a certain anger and hatred. For Agamben, as well, "our relationship with the work of art today has itself become a problem" (2019). He sees the recent history of Western art as one that makes a movement from an emphasis on the product and the production of the artwork (be that a painting or a choreography) towards the artist and the artistic practice as an end in itself, detached from an external work: a shift from *poiesis* to *praxis*. Performance, then, takes an in-between position "in which the action itself presents itself as work" (Agamben 2019). The trajectory runs parallel to the evolution towards a post-Fordist economy in the arts as well, which Bojana Kunst has analysed clearly in *Proximity of art and capitalism* (2015). Agamben's critique of performance is also reminiscent of how Jon McKenzie wrote in *Perform, or else . . .* that performance—organizational, cultural and technological—is the paradigm of our century in all realms of society, which makes permanent action and productivity a never-ending necessity (McKenzie 2001).

As Agamben sees performance itself as the problem, it is especially interesting to look at how performance and performing arts themselves seek to find a way out of the conundrum. To fundamentally revisit this notion of performance goes beyond the scope of this article, yet the case of Ne Mosquito Pas already harbours some fruitful elements to start answering the question of how artists can rebuild a relation to what they do, to their work and the trap of being stuck in mere praxis. A first, perhaps obvious element is that making short solos out of failures is a necessary externalization on the road toward a poetics of impotentiality. The tension between making and the 'im-' of impotentiality is precisely what prevents these solos from being conventional theatre or dance shows. Although they are based on personal experiences of failure, they are sufficiently crafted to prevent them from becoming the exploitative kind of performance that relies too heavily on an exhibition of the self. But what does this inoperativity look like concretely? If language is "exhibited and suspended" in poetry or painting is "exposed and suspended in the act of painting" (Agamben 2019), then what activity is presented and deactivated in Ne Mosquito Pas and, more broadly, in theatre and performance in general? One possibility is that it could be performance itself, as a governmental and neoliberal apparatus. However, that does not tell us more about the actual actions, movements, words and gestures being performed on stage. What are their qualities? How to perform what Agamben calls the "inoperativity internal to the operation itself" (2019)?

One particular solo presented an intriguing mode of this inoperativity in operation and offers some insight into how this works. It was made and performed by dancer and choreographer Nathan Ooms.³ Standing with his face toward the wall, he slowly takes his shirt and trousers off while saying, in a detached, uncomfortable yet highly affective way, “Oh my fucking god/I’m a really sensitive person/I’m an artist” (Ooms 2021). Wearing a shiny silver speedo slip, he collapses and makes his way toward the floor to begin sliding across the floor, dragging his Apple MacBook—a token of the hypermobile artist—with him. He appears to be reading the text from the screen, adding to the insincere style of what nevertheless feel like very sincere utterances—so sincere, it hurts to pronounce them. In a manner going back and forth between bored, indifferent, erotic, obscene and painfully over the top, he continues to make his way across the floor with his laptop. His trajectory is interspersed with empty poses with objects, such as oranges, with great discomfort and long pauses, making statements like, “I am so fucking cynical/I am a god damn cynic, and this is a piece about gay rights/It is even worse than I thought it would be/I am a really sssssssscynical person” (2021). Ooms’ cynicism is particularly performative. His gestures and utterances waver between believing and not believing in what he is saying, failing to care about these issues and yet being deeply concerned—a detached alienation and a discomfort caused by being implicated and complicit.

In line with Žižek’s description of the cynic, this performer, while at first might seem to not believe what he is saying, believes much more in what he is saying than he can imagine (Žižek 2009). However, whereas the cynic, for Žižek, is complicit with the status quo, Nathan Ooms makes use of cynicism as a strategy to survive and suspend a toxic environment: “I’m digging cynic holes because I believe there’s something on the other side” (2021). Cynicism combined with impotentiality in the context of *Ne Mosquito Pas* becomes a complex yet effective way to cause friction between life and work and hence upend post-Fordism’s conflation of life and work. As a result, it becomes possible once again to contemplate one’s own performance and to consciously exhibit the dynamics of performing the self. This made Ooms’ performance strangely sincere, intimate and personal. The discomfort with the utterance, the constant resistance against statements and the disbelief in them: they render these statements inoperative and deactivate their performative function. They point straight toward an intimate sphere, a clandestine, hidden realm where the self is painfully unknown to itself. It is not about whether he means what he says—maybe Ooms does not even know what he believes or how to believe in it in a way that is truly his. This is where the inoperativity internal to the operation itself resonates with being human as state of always being in between, to the suspension of the modern subject’s absorption in an apparatus of performance through the cynical exhibition of this absorption.

The framework of *Ne Mosquito Pas* in which solos are *made* is key in this rendering inoperative the apparatus of performance. It doubles Ooms’ cynical position, as it presents it as one of the many failures by the artists making and showing work in the context of a platform. The framework creates a distance between the individual solos and the audience, as well as between the artists and their own acts, as the frame precisely highlights the failure and celebrates the negativity of it with a lot of humour.

The question remains, then: what does this cynical solo performance—and by extension, *Ne Mosquito Pas*—believe in, in addition to its opening up of a contemplation of the self? To answer this question, it is interesting to go back to Ooms’ first sentence: “I am an artist” (2021). Not only is this statement a cynical remark about his own status and about the artist as product; the intimacy of the solo as a format and this particular case shift artistry toward another level, away from the art market. Considering the context of *Ne Mosquito Pas*, his self-presentation as an artist and his commitment to this solo, daring to lay bare this intimate state of being, I would say that this solo and most of the other solos in this initiative believe in art as a possible political practice as a way to “gain experience of themselves and constitute themselves as forms of life” (Agamben 2019). They do so with what Simon Critchley (2012) calls “the faith of the faithless: a faith which does not give

up on the idea of truth, but transfigures its meaning". In theatre, this means: to continue with theatre as an artistic practice in times of neoliberal budget cuts, right-wing populist attempts to control cultural production and thwart its criticality and artistic freedom and a reductive desire for activism within the arts field; to continue maintaining the impotentiality in the work of art, challenging neoliberal notions of potentiality that require an impossible self-realization. This requires a faith of the faithless, a regenerated trust in performance as a meaningful site of exploration of understanding, experience and contemplation, without hoping that it will solve anything.

4. I Prefer (Not) To: Bartlebabe and the Comic Self

Whereas Ooms' solo had, its internal impotentiality highlighted by the framework of Ne Mosquito Pas' failing evening programs, the question of how to still 'do' something as a standalone performance remains partially unresolved here. How to develop a relation to work and the artwork *in* and *with* the artwork itself outside of a particular frame or format that already places 'productivity' between brackets? Does a personal story or experience always have to be explicitly involved in order to gain more autonomy both on the level of one's own life and on the level of the artwork?

Bojana Kunst's examples of (im)potentiality resisting exhaustive productivity, such as the work of Mladen Stiljinovic (Kunst 2015), rely mostly on passivity, laziness and not doing. Although these are indeed clear attitudes of non-productivity as work, they are perhaps opposites rather than resistances. It would be a pity if artists wanting to find other critical ways to deactivate the obligation of productivity are condemned to doing nothing—or not much. Again, it is a matter of finding that impotentiality internal to a work, to doing and acting. *Bartlebabe* (Ooms and Jäger 2020), the performance Ooms made together with Anna Franziska Jäger⁴, suggests such a pathway beyond the paralysis of deconstruction or the passivity of the refusal.

Herman Melville's short story *Bartleby, the scrivener: a story from Wall Street* (1853) has been considered by several thinkers (e.g., Deleuze, Agamben) as an antidote, a refusal of the exploitation and continuous growth of capitalism. One day, Bartleby, a clerk on Wall Street, stops doing his job. When asked why he is not working, he calmly states: *I prefer not to*. This preferred no, instead of a firm refusal, upends the categories of affirmation and negation and becomes a token of (im)potentiality. If Bartleby's *I prefer not to* is a figure of staying in tension with a negative, what is often forgotten is that Bartleby, after terrifying and disrupting his workplace, superiors and social surroundings, in the end, also refuses life and perishes. Potentiality, thus, is also in a deep relation to negativity and death (cf. Agamben 1999). Yet the question remains of how to stay in relation to one's non-being while living. How to refuse, disrupt and not self-destruct; how to still live and *act*—without this action falling, again, in the trap of what was deconstructed and refused in the first place?

Ooms and Jäger's *Bartlebabe* is a twenty-first century update of the Bartleby figure. Whereas he says no, she says yes. Anna Franziska Jäger, wearing a short, white shirt and something that resembles a bulletproof vest, enters the white-floored stage on high heels. She has a trolley suitcase with her, and a small microphone is taped on her forehead instead of the cheek, reminiscent of Neil Harbison, the 'first' official cyborg artist⁵. This is a hybrid creature: a character between human and machine, between present and future. In the back, a white desk is surrounded by boxes with recognizable designs reminiscent of Amazon, Apple and other brands and online stores. The stage's white floor is mirrored in the white backdrop, making the scenography look like one big MacBook, with the show as one long browsing session being 'scrolled' across the stage-as-screen or, rather, screen-as-stage.

In a first scene, Jäger proclaims that she will show the audience how to build a car. With the intonation and high-intensity energy of a motivational speaker and slogans like "Just do it!/It's all about speed and drive!" (Ooms and Jäger 2020), she addresses the audience while opening the trolley suitcase and taking out and throwing around 'stuff' that she arranges into an imagined car. A string of cables become the seat belts; a plastic bag gets tossed to the front as an airbag. In this scene, key aspects of the show's dramaturgy

and performativity already come to the fore. Alienating pauses that break the artificially fast-paced rhythm of a very motivated figure, speaking too fast to the point of losing her breath and yet going on panting and shouting, and the continuous readjusting of the skirt, ponytail and outfit as an expression of ongoing unease return throughout the performance. The same goes for the split between objects and the ways they are described, named and handled, which creates a semiotic malfunction. Wavering between being overly aggressive, sensitive or nonchalant, the performance becomes a mix of absurdity, madness, depression and overload by overstimulation and ill-managed emotions.

The first scene concludes with Jäger sitting on the floor, surrounded by pieces of plastic, wrappers, Styrofoam, textile, cardboard and other materials that are more leftovers of something else than things in themselves: the drive toward success crashed on an empty stage littered with stuff. The semiotics do not work anymore; meaning seems to be lost in this whirlwind. This is also why one scene or action can seamlessly flow into another and why emotions can flip from high to low. The boundaries have dissolved, just like how in a social media feed, advertisement follows intimate photos, follows political propaganda, follows a news item, follows inspirational quotes, ad infinitum.

The car scene morphs into a speech on friendship and self-care, performed with anger, which, again, mutates quickly into another self-presentation at a slower pace, this time adopting the persona of a consultant promising the audience “to catch a big fish: I will help you think out of the box, and back into the box again” (Ooms and Jäger 2020). This almost seems too ridiculous to be a found verbatim quote. The text of the performance is indeed a collection of existing materials found online, but these are modified to highlight their nonsensicality and their emptiness. This strategy criticizes at once the hollow discourse of so many vlogs and consultancy speeches, as well as the ways people present themselves and perform ‘success’ on social media. Another strategy lies in the friction between the text and the sources it refers to and the way it is performed. For example, while unboxing a strap-on amplifier, Jäger describes its parts in a semiotically dysfunctional way—the strap is a stripe; the cable, a candy. Once she has the device running, she says some of the Harvard Sentences, test sentences for audio devices that are not meant to mean anything. Jäger recites them like a poem. Presenting something meaningless as meaningful is a key strategy of the show and, one could say, a key strategy of much online content as well. This semiotic and performative disruption of words, actions, speech acts and things was also a “destructive force” attributed to Bartleby by Gilles Deleuze (Agamben 1999). The parodic treatment of online content by the Bartlebabe figure on a theatre stage can hence be interpreted as a push toward a deactivation of the apparatus it was drafted from.

If Kunst described how the contemporary artist was the model for the post-Fordist worker, then in Bartlebabe, this post-Fordist entrepreneur returns ‘home’ to the stage. Just as Bartleby was the token of the gesture of preferring *not* to, this performance’s Bartlebabe is the mascot for a *yes, and* attitude. She is a parody of the self-branding and endless networking required in “the new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiappello 2005); she is the post-Fordist performer on speed. Ooms and Jäger’s Bartlebabe is a physical materialization of the rollercoaster of emotions, cries for attention, flashy ads, dense or boring vlogs, gifs, TikTok clips, Instagram posts, chat conversations, Mark Zuckerberg speeches or Žižek memes (yes, those are also included in the show). It is like Jäger’s character’s plea for “less friction, more flow” drifts her into a whirlpool of chaotic connections. She becomes intoxicated by these materials. Whereas the 19th-century scrivener “is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives [. . .] the writing tablet [. . .] nothing other than this white sheet” (Agamben 1999), Bartlebabe dives into the abyss of potentiality in a mode that rather evokes the image of a touchscreen packed with content. The Bartlebabe figure shows how by saying yes, one overflows and verges on the edge of implosion, absurdity and the nonsensical. Indeed, after a while, a kind of desperation seeps in the performance and cracks in the appearance of success. Long and loud, over-the-top screams express disarray, only to also transform into a *performed* sadness, flowing back into the online source references.

In a pastiche on online ‘masterclasses’ that are offered by sometimes well-respected actors and whose ads during the early COVID lockdowns flooded social media feeds, the Bartlebabe figure reflects on her being an actress. “How do you become a Bartlebabe”, she begins her exposé. At this point, Jäger introduces another version of the Bartlebabe, a more monstrous side, which also appears as something that is only pretend, only ‘acted’. This monstrous Bartlebabe returns in the final scene of the piece when, on a smoke-filled and green-lit stage, in a Gollum-like fashion, she proclaims to be resurrected. “Unleash love”: that is the advice of this undead Bartlebabe that now indeed seems like she would have preferred not to. Is this, then, the real Bartlebabe? Or is this the ‘character’ Bartlebabe played by the actress Anna Franziska Jäger, or the character Bartlebabe played by the high-performance character played by Anna Franziska Jäger? And what does this monstrous Bartlebabe actually tell us about the previous section of the show?

Throughout the whole piece, the main question that stuck with me concerned the relation between this character and her actions and her words. In other words, what is the position the makers of this piece are taking? Bartlebabe does not appear as the victim of the whirlpool of theatricalized clips and online stuff she is performing. Being exposed to an audience, the act of ‘performing’ itself, does not seem to be a burden either. In the way Jäger performs, there is no apparent moral judgement on the people generating these clips, be it Zuckerberg or an anonymous vlogger. *Bartlebabe* is not only a piece *about* performance, both in the neoliberal and cultural sense; it also seeks to render performance inoperative by way of the non-judgmental friction between the performer and what is performed. Although at some point, the piece tends to demonstrate a negative evaluation of life in the digital age, it handily steers away from that perhaps too easy conclusion each time, leaving the question of judgement to the audience. It is the presentation of something meaningless and empty as meaningful and emotional that allows for a way of relating to these sources for the performer through acting.

One way of understanding the relation between performer and performed—one that would be in line with a poetics of impotentiality and inoperativity—would be as comic instead of tragic. This would explain the possibilities of the medium of theatre in rendering performance inoperative in a way that differs from the literal refusal and preferring not to, but rather by taking the ‘positive road’ to negativity. There is indeed something quite comical in the dramaturgy of the piece and Jäger’s acting. She is no tragic character succumbing to the consequences of her actions. She does not seem to have chosen what she is doing or saying, yet she is not determined in a negative way by her performance—a significant element, considering the abovementioned critique of post-Fordist performativity. The comical actor, Agamben states, “imitates the character” instead of identifying with it as in tragedy. In this way, the actions do not determine the actor, but they become jokes that “exhibit the non-lived” (2015, my translation). *Bartlebabe* is a composition made out of many characters found online—a character of characters, so to say. The question of her relation to these characters actually comes down the question of her ‘self’. But can we even speak of a self in her case? The character Bartlebabe appears to be only surface; she seems to have no identity. Like in Agamben’s description of the Commedia dell’arte figure of Pulcinella (Agamben 2015), there seems to be no one behind the mask, and this is confusing for modern, humanist conceptions of the subject as a deeper core with a free will. From this latter perspective, the replacement of the subject by a series of masks as the ultimate consequence of the digital age would mean that humanity is doomed to be alienated by the apparatuses that take over our lives, our *characters* or profiles. However, the game of intense imitation in *Bartlebabe* suggests that this vision of the self as a deeper, substantial being might not be correct and could be replaced by something else—that is, a being in relation to the self, to being: a form of life that is developed not by the specific actions themselves but *by the way we do* them. The performance of the self becomes not an essentialist identity but, rather, a playful game of modes of performance that makes visible and available for experience the forms our lives take. Performance, in the sense of post-Fordist labour, is rendered inoperative, as it is no longer tied to a particular sense of

subjectivity that is the currency in this value system. Like a 21st century jester, Bartlebabe juggles with the many straitjackets of our time to suspend their constraints without taking these jackets off.

A question remains, then: where does this lead? Are we forever entangled in a game of characters, or is there a way out? As a final gesture, the monster Bartlebabe plays an answering machine cassette tape: "I'm not here/you can leave a message/I don't know if I will hear it/I'm everywhere/I'm with everybody/I'm out of office" (Ooms and Jäger 2020). Everywhere and nowhere, potentiality with impotentiality: it might not solve anything, but it may allow artists to make instead of being paralyzed, mesmerized or swept away by the combination of spectacle and digital omnipresence.

5. Conclusions

Organizing as a collective, like *Camping Sunset*, seems to be modelled after the various collectives that were founded in Belgium in the 1980s and 1990s (Dito, TgSTAN, De Roovers, . . .) in order to develop the autonomy of the actor (Van den Dries 2010), an old recipe that is artistically not always the most interesting pathway toward innovative forms and performances. However, the various recent collectives do make visible the desire to make, play and work in a generous, careful way, especially in contrast and as an alternative to their precarious socioeconomic conditions. It also allows for the exploration of different relations to work and performance, in which the performance becomes part of a process instead of vice versa, as with *Camping Sunset*. What I mean here is that whereas in critiques of productivity in the 1990s and early 2000s, process was often 'performed' on stage, hence becoming the show, there is now a renewed focus on 'making' a work. The typical example of the former would be that of the artists or performers explaining what their research was, how they worked and what steps they took toward the performance. In the cases discussed in this essay, however, performing an actual crafted work can be critical as well. In *Camping Sunset*, performing *Ten Oorlog* for three weeks is a process of growing as a group through a piece. *Ne Mosquito Pas* presents an artistic format, a platform as space to share and work. The framework of these evenings opens up a space to incorporate impotentiality in their actions and to disconnect from the compulsion to perform, which allows the artists to be artists that make something instead of artists compelled to perform as artists.

Just as the cynical mode allows for a combination of detachment and intimacy, so does the comical mode of performance enable a combination of distance and proximity to the materials that are cited. They both allow for a relation to negativity by way of including impotentiality and inoperativity in their doing and making. Whereas the first does so by a sort of holding back, the other does so by giving almost too much.

These cases all seek a new relation to 'work' in general and to the work of art and performance in particular. They are attempts to find autonomy again in a time when art and performance's closeness to neoliberal meritocracy, as well as the desire and demand to be politically and socially 'effective', has made many weary of art's autonomy, not to mention the tremendous sense of impossibility Symons saw in a world complicated by climate catastrophe. Each case explores a way to work with this impossibility, not as a potential to go on as usual but as a "dark impotentiality" (van Baarle 2019) that needs to find a place within the artistic work. All three cases suggest that a new autonomy is under development, one in which not the artist as individual genius is at the centre but, rather, the work artists do and make together. The autonomy of the artist thus shifts toward the autonomy of the work of art. It is autonomous in the sense that it claims a space as artwork (not as social, political, economic or environmental work), all the while remaining in relation to those who made it. In this relation, be it cynical, comical or another mode of a poetics of impotentiality or inoperativity, another pathway dawns besides that of depressed paralysis or disappointed abandonment—a path on which, for Agamben (2019), it is our happiness that is at stake.

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Notes

- ¹ This festival presents a ‘best of’ of the past year, selected by a jury. De Roo’s state of the union is unfortunately only available in Dutch: <https://www.theaterfestival.be/leve-het-toneelspelen/> (accessed on 20 March 2022).
- ² They were no doubt also inspired by an emerging theatre collective like Tibaldus. This collective consists of Timeau De Keyzer, Hans Mortelmans and Simon De Winne, a group of KASK drama students that graduated together in 2009.
- ³ Ooms graduated at P.A.R.T.S. Studios, the research cycle of the school founded by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, after obtaining his MA in Drama at KASK—School of Arts. In his P.A.R.T.S. graduation piece, *The Honey House* (2021), he also explores this cynical attitude, contrasting a dystopian first part in which the dancers evoked a Ballardian mix of shame, eroticism, discomfort, continuous movement of objects, poses and pressure, with a honey sweet second part in which they perform ‘happiness’, a picnic where everyone is too nice, to the point it becomes repulsive.
- ⁴ I got to know Anna Franziska Jäger as an artist during the creative process of *Human Landscapes I*, a performance by Michiel Vandevelde (2018). We also met during a masterclass I taught together with Kris Verdonck at KASK—School of Arts’ drama department.
- ⁵ See e.g., <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/may/06/neil-harbisson-worlds-first-cyborg-artist> (accessed on 30 March 2022).

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