Deleuze & differential presence in performance

Introduction

This short paper will introduce 'differential presence' as a concept of a style of living that affirms an ontology of difference, primarily inspired by the thought of Gilles Deleuze. In order to understand the specificity of this style, we need to begin with an examination of Deleuze's ontology of difference, which I will do by providing an exposition of the key concept of difference, as it relates to those of becoming, affect, encounter and duration, as well as to the practices of Allan Kaprow, Antonin Artaud & Goat Island. Throughout I will aim to emphasise the *value* differential presence might have for us on an experiential level, constructing differential presence as a concept concerned with the appearance and perception of difference, not with some 'other-worldly' form of creativity to which "we" have no access. But much depends on the construction of this "we" or rather, on the pragmatics of living the 'destratified' life to which difference presents itself. And this is where performance comes in. Performance, I will suggest, can be constructed as an event in which differential presence is released – not as a representation of Deleuze's ontology of difference, but as a creation that repeats the difference of the world.

Deleuze's ontology of difference & the experience of affect, encounter & duration

For Deleuze, philosophy has been complicit with a wider cultural tendency to promote identity and sameness and a neglect towards novelty and difference. Even the very notion of difference has characteristically been defined 'negatively, as the not-sameness of two or more entities' whether those things are understood to differ in terms of ontological status - like the live performance and its document - or in terms of position, or genre. In each case, it is the entities or 'things' that are understood to come first, and the difference

that is understood to derive from them. In contrast, as Todd May explains, 'What Deleuze wants is not a derivative difference, but difference in itself, a difference that he believes is the source *not only* of the derivative difference but of the *sameness* on the basis of which derivative difference is derived' (May 2003: 144) In other words, Deleuze is, perhaps first and foremost, a process philosopher for whom relations of force have ontological primacy with respect to the 'things' – that is, objects or subjects – they constitute. In this sense, we could say that Deleuze, like Heidegger and Derrida, wants to break with the privileging of being-as-presence. "Being", for Deleuze, is not about fixed identities but about an unstable flux that is understood to found those identities. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, for example, Deleuze sides with Heraclitus rather than Parmenides in insisting that 'there is no being beyond becoming' (1983: 23) or, in other words, that 'becoming is the final reality' (May 2003: 143). Presence is becoming, then, for Deleuze.

But what does this ontology have to do with experience, and specifically with the experience in performance that has come to be named 'presence'? Crucially, although difference transcends *conscious* experience for Deleuze, he and Guattari emphasise that it *can* be experienced in the body, and I now want to look at 3 key ways in which differential presence appears on this experiential level.

In the first instance, Deleuze suggests that differential presence is perceptible as 'affect', as that which shatters fixed distinctions presumed to separate self and others, or the human and inhuman. As Brian Massumi notes, affect 'is most often used loosely as a synonym for emotion' or personal feeling (2002: 28). In Deleuze, however, affect is 'the change, or variation that occurs when bodies collide or come into contact' (Parr 2005: 11); affect is the perpetual variation of what Spinoza calls our 'force of existing' or 'power of acting'. The affect 'is not a personal feeling, nor is it a characteristic' Deleuze and Guattari argue; rather, it is an excessive, subrepresentative force of difference 'that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel' (1988: 240). Presence as affect, then, involves a *loss* of self or an undoing of identity, but it also names an experiment with what a body can do in 'composition', or in an 'assemblage', with other forces.

An example of differential presence's appearance as affect and loss of identity can be found in the 'Activities' of Allan Kaprow. For instance, the aptly titled *Affect* (1974) could be conceived as performing an extended experimentation with what a body can do: testing what transformations might happen when a particular human body enters into composition with ice, with a lightbulb; in a *hot water-skin-electric fan-unfamiliar territory* assemblage. However, it is also in the Activities period that Kaprow most directly takes on the question of art's identity and the question of what it is to be an artist. Being an artist, Kaprow suggests, 'is to know oneself, [but] to know oneself is to forget oneself (which is the image one has of one's self). To forget art (one's self) is to have a glimmer of reality. And to have that glimmer is to narrow the space between oneself and all phenomena' (Kaprow 1992, 26). Kaprow is questioning and critical of convention both in life and in art, as that which actively blocks differential presence's appearance as unexpected affect and becoming. As nonart or lifelike art, Kaprow's Activities aim to occupy a threshold that is the becoming-life of art and the becoming-art of life. Likewise, with his concept of the 'un-artist', Kaprow saw experimental art as a practice in which the artist slips away from the 'profession's accumulated attributes and meanings' – *becoming-account executive*, *-ecologist*, *-stunt rider*. The artist does not disappear here – differential presence is *not* absence; rather 'the un-artist is one who changes jobs' (Kelley 2004: 158), changing the other professional identities as much as her own.

In this way, we can pre-empt any potential anxieties that the affirmation of presence as affect constitutes a reinstatement of a mind/body duality in which feeling is privileged over thinking. This is absolutely not the case. Rather, what is at stake is a re-thinking of thinking itself as something that a body can do, as something that inhuman and human bodies *do* do, insofar as thinking is defined as creation rather than representation. According to the hylomorphic perspective which Deleuze rejects, inert matter depends upon the transcendent intervention of conscious minds for its form and meaning. In contrast, as John Protevi argues, Deleuze provides 'the ontology of a world able to yield the results forthcoming in complexity theory' (Protevi 2006: 19); namely, the phenomenon of emergence which Deleuze accounts for in terms of the notion of a line of variation, virtuality or difference running through all things.

Following on from this point, the second way that differential presence presents itself on the level of experience is as that which *makes us think*, or as Deleuze sometimes puts it, as that which 'forces thought'. For Deleuze, thought is not the product of language but of what he calls a 'fundamental encounter' (Deleuze 1994: 139). Something in the world, he argues

> forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon. It may be grasped in a range of affective tones: wonder, love, hatred, suffering. In whichever tone, its primary characteristic is that *it can only be sensed*. In this sense it is opposed to recognition (139 – first emphasis original, second emphasis added).

Objects of recognition, Deleuze argues, 'do not disturb thought' insofar as they provide thought with 'an image of itself'; they reaffirm for thought, in other words, what it already thinks it knows. Differential presence, in contrast, names an encounter which 'defies consciousness, recognition and representation' (Bogue 1989: 78) but nevertheless presents itself to sensation. In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the philosopher then condenses these sensations or intensities in the creation of concepts, whereas the artist is assigned the role of making perceptible 'the imperceptible forces that populate the world, affect us, and make us become' (1994: 182). In neither case is this about translating the encounter into a representation which would stabilise the disruptive force of difference into something more palatable for consciousness. Rather, making art or doing philosophy involves a process of capture that repeats the difference of the encounter in a manner that, in turn, forces new thoughts upon an audience. And so the repetition of difference goes on.

An example of differential presence's appearance as fundamental encounter can be found in Artaud's radio play, *To have done with the judgment of god*. In the play, Artaud suggests that man thinks as he is made; or, as Catherine Dale argues, Artaud 'throws both mind and body into consternation accusing man of thinking along the organized lines of the

organism, that is, of thinking in the same way as he is constructed and vice versa' (Dale 2002: 87). The answer is to disorganise or destratify the body, including the voice, in order to think differently; to make yourself the famous 'body without organs' to create the unthought as the only genuine kind of thinking. One element of this body without organs is a voice liberated from the restrictive task of communication, which uses language as a concrete, albeit self-different entity that acts on bodies rather than merely representing them. Here, destratification involves putting elements like vocal intonation, diction, pitch, and meaning into variation. In *To have done with the judgment of god*, the destratified voice can be most obviously heard in the passages of glossolalia that erupt from the text, and in Artaud's distant, resonating cries from the stairwell. Whereas the stratified voice speaks 'perfectly and soberly' (Deleuze 1997: 247), Artaud's destratified voice speaks too high and too fast to act as the servant of communication. Likewise in the passages where he performs a dialogue with himself, Artaud uses his voice to enact the inclusive disjunctions that Deleuze associates with the schizophrenic: he is mad and sane, patient and analyst. Here, the voice is neither the phenomenological medium that allows the presence of self-consciousness to itself, nor is it the mere 'simulation' of presence as Derrida contends in *Speech and Phenomena* – the response to the threat of the difference that language is said to introduce into self-presence (Derrida 1973: 15). Rather, Artaud's use of voice embraces the potential 'to be a foreigner, *but* in one's own tongue', or to perform the difference in one's own voice, in a gesture that, for Deleuze and Guattari, learns from, and expresses a solidarity with those minorities who 'work over' a foreign language from within (Deleuze 1997: 247).

A third and final way to conceive of how differential presence presents itself is through the concept of duration which Deleuze borrows from Henri Bergson. A thing, such as a sugar lump, can be approached in terms of its degree of difference from other things in space. However, Deleuze argues that we must also ask after the being of the sugar as defined by

> a duration, a rhythm of duration, a way of being in time that is at least partially revealed in the process of its dissolving and that shows how this

> sugar differs in kind not only from other things, but first and foremost from itself (Deleuze 1988: 32).

The first work by the Chicago-based company Goat Island, *Soldier, Child, Tortured Man* (1987), asks after the difference of the performer in a comparable fashion. We do not have to wait for the performer to melt, but we do have to wait for him or her to become exhausted, to reach the point when he or she is physically unable to perform a further repetition of a choreographic sequence. Goat Island allow the performer's way of being in time to define the temporal structure of the performance, revealing the difference of the body from itself in the process of becoming exhausted. In turn, just as Deleuze argues that my impatience at waiting for the sugar to melt is a lived experience that reveals 'other durations that beat to other rhythms, that differ in kind from mine' (1988: 32), the company are well known for performances which insist upon slowing down audiences, recalibrating them through the temporality of the performance's unfolding. Unafraid to repeat (differentially), a Goat Island dance sequence will often allow a single minute gesture to take up an unexpectedly extended period of time. For example, in *How Dear to Me The Hour When Daylight Dies*,

> [performer] Matthew Goulish spends upwards of 10 minutes standing and rubbing the back of one hand with the fingers of his other hand…leaving the audience with time to watch seemingly very little for - in theatrical/performance terms - a long time (Mitchell in Goat Island 1999: np).

In turn, director Lin Hixson's recent article on the company's last performance *The Lastmaker* suggests that the company even approach the arrangement of performance space as a means to affirm the idea of the present as constituted by the co-existence of multiple durations. Hixson writes:

> You sit on one side of the performance. I sit on the other. When I look across the room and see you watching the performers sing songs around

> the dining room table, I know your heart beats at a different rate than mine. This tells me we will die at different times. Knowing this I wave good-bye to you… My duration encompasses and discloses yours. Your duration encompasses and discloses mine (Hixson 2008: 52).

For philosopher John Mullarkey, there are ethical as well as ontological implications to this revelation; not in terms of an ethical code in which determinate identities are assigned specific rights, but with regard to a *respect for* a multiplicity of ways of being in time, a variety of speeds of living: the speed of the old as well as the young, of animals as well as humans, of the earth as well as capital.

Conclusion

To summarise, what I am calling 'differential presence' operates on the level of experience as that which undoes identity, makes us think and reveals other durations or ways of being in time. The affirmation of difference or the amplification of variation is Deleuze's over-arching value whether in relation to theatre, philosophy, or politics. As such, and contra the view that 'micrological view[s] of ontology' are 'largely irrelevant to most people's practical experience of the world' (Erickson 2006: 151), I want to argue that differential presence *matters*. There may be a gap between this process ontology and *our current* experience: between an ontology that insists on the secondary nature of identity and stasis and the pragmatic need to call a work 'finished', a political need to identify oneself as a 'woman' or a bureaucratic need to identify with a self in order to open a bank account. But differential presence still matters because it outlines alternative future experiences of 'self', language, thought and time.