

Dying on Stage: The Last Performance of Péter Halász

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Abstract: Death and the dead can be represented in many different ways, both in the arts and in everyday life. A permanent challenge for the theatre is the representation of death. Naturalistic and stylized acting handle this issue differently. In handbooks for actors, there have been different methods and suggestions on how to enact dying on stage. When an actor arrives in his personal life to his forthcoming death, these acting methods lose their usability. Péter Halász (1943–2006) directed and attended (alive) his own funeral ceremony in February 2006, subverting and challenging all major features of the representation of death. The second part of the essay discusses the issue of repeatedly and only once carried out performances, while the final part turns to the topic of the death of many. There is an antecedent to the COVID epidemic, namely AIDS, which initiated a special performative way to commemorate the several hundred thousand victims of the disease. This is the NAMES project AIDS memorial quilt, which can be understood as a form of performative memory.

Staging death

Lessing wrote in the second issue of his *Dramatic Notes*, later referred to as *The Hamburg Dramaturgy*, the following about death in drama.

¹ The full quote is: "In another still worse tragedy where one of the principal characters died quite casually, a spectator asked his neighbour, 'But what did she die of?'— 'Of what? Of the fifth act', was the reply. In very truth, the fifth act is an ugly evil disease that carries oft' many a one to whom the first four

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Dying on the stage can be a dramaturgical formula from the point of view of the story, but how to carry it out is a permanent challenge for the theatre and for acting. Performing death differs historically and culturally, but it expresses quite clearly the cultural conventions towards the human body and its passing.

Foremost, I refer to a lesser-known performative event when dying and the funeral ceremony were presented in a somewhat paradoxical and controversial way. The theatrical work of the Hungarian Péter Halász, first in Hungary (1969–1976) within the Universitas Company, then in the Kassák House Studio, and later in the Dohány Street Apartment Theatre, afterwards in the United States (1977–1985) in the Squat Theatre, and finally primarily in Hungary after 1991, always included the provocative usage of theatricality. This theatricality that impregnates all of his oeuvre reoccur in his works that thematise and stage death, like in his early work, *The Eighth Circle of Hell* (1967), in the Squat's *Andy*

acts promised a longer life." Gotthold Ephraim LESSING, *The Hamburg Dramaturgy: Dramatic Notes*, No. 2. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1878), 238, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/33435/33435-h/33435-h.htm> <https://archive.org/stream/thedramatic-works33435gut/pg33435.txt>.

Warhol's Last Love (1978, in its part, *Interview with the Dead*), and finally in his very last public appearance, a performance in which he evoked in an artistic, ceremonial way his own death and funeral.

When Halász learned that he had an incurable disease and had a very short time left, he organised his own farewell ceremony. The invitation card for the event included the following:

1943–2006 /
You are kindly invited to /
the wake and last honours of /
Péter Halász /
before his cremation /
the family /
Hall of Art, 6 February 2006, 10 pm

A month after the event, Péter Halász died in New York City on March 9. The news of his death in February was something to happen in the future; a few weeks later, it became an event of the past, a piece of information. The promise of hope and its fictional feature changed forever.

The performance of death got a special setting because of the site, which was neither a traditional place to lay out the body (a cemetery, church, or chapel) nor a theatre. Nevertheless, it was an artistic environment, a representative institution of contemporary fine arts, and a site for performances. Probably it did not play a role in choosing the location that Imre Nagy and his fellow martyrs (who were executed in 1958 for their role in the 1956 revolution) were laid out on the stairs of the Hall of Art before their reburial on June 16, 1989. Nonetheless, the spirit of the place has preserved this event.

The wake of Péter Halász was based on multiple inversions. The inversion of place, choosing an artistic institution as the environment of a funeral service; the inversion of time, inverting the order of death and the final farewell. And, as a result, with further inversions, for instance, that on the catafalque, in the open coffin, there was not a passive

corpse but an active agent and participant. Someone from whom the mourning audience expects manifestations, who is seen by the audience as a player—in the sense of a performer—in his own funeral.

During the event, Péter Halász was lying in an open coffin. On the walls around him, close-ups of him were projected, as he was spending the two hours of the ceremony almost wordless. Listening to the eulogies, he rarely reacted. For instance, he laughed at jokes, and at the end, he set up in the coffin, and looked silently at the people gathered around him for a long time. During the evening, Péter Halász did not play the role of a dying man. What happened though was also a theatrical event. As one of the orators said, “you are not an actor; you are theatre”. Theatre was present not in a kind of acting or roleplaying but in the situation, the context, and the perception. Halász created the framework, which gave him the opportunity, to say goodbye with a theatrical event that was consistent with and fit for his lifework.

The characteristics of representation without reproduction and the ontology of performance appeared in an intensive and radical way in this final theatrical event. As Peggy Phelan wrote on the politics of performance, a certain type of performance

“attempts to invoke a distinction between presence and representation by using the singular body as a metonymy for the apparently nonreciprocal experience of pain. This performance calls witnesses to the singularity of the individual's death and asks the spectator to do the impossible – to share that death by rehearsing for it. (It is for this reason that performance shares a fundamental bond with ritual. The Catholic Mass, for example, is the ritualized performative promise to remember and to rehearse for the Other's death.) The promise evoked by this performance then is to learn to value what is lost, to learn not the meaning but the value of what

cannot be reproduced or seen (again). It begins with the knowledge of its own failure, that it cannot be achieved."²

The living body of Péter Halász substituted for the corpse that it turned into a month later. He was his own puppet or mannequin, which became a one-time, unrepeatable object not only because the protagonist soon died but also because this event cannot be "re-enacted," as the body was cremated. The knowledge of the singleness and unrepeatability is present in this case not only as the feature of a usually taken theatrical event (which is normally performed several times), but as the character of the performance with its singleness and ephemeral existence. The body performing death in this event, demonstrating the vanishing of both the performance and the individual life, functions as a sample for the spectator to train for their own death.

Once and Repeatedly

This unique occasion, to call it blasphemically, a "once in a lifetime" event, leads us to the issue of repeatability, a theoretically rather problematic aspect of theatrical performances. Theatre artists and theatre studies incessantly stress that each theatre performance is unique and unrepeatable. At the beginning of the 20th century, when Edward Gordon Craig questioned whether theatre is an art form, among other things, he referred to theatre's ephemerality, unrepeatability, and the changeability of the performers' disposition. In his 1908 essay, *The Actor and the Über-marionette*, Craig argued, that

"acting is not an art. [...] For accident is an enemy of the artist. [...] In order to

make any work of art it is clear we may only work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of these materials. [...] In the modern theatre [...] all which is presented [...] is of an accidental nature. The actions of the actor's body, the expression of his face, the sounds of his voice, all are at the mercy of the winds of his emotions"³.

All those characteristics that Craig mentions as the foremost features of a theatre play—accidentality, contingency, being at the mercy of emotions—suggest that a performance is indeed unique and unrepeatable, and this is exactly what Craig condemns as theatre's greatest fallacy. According to him, theatre could be regarded as an art if it could create performances that are repeatable in their entirety, i.e., if permanence and not ephemerality characterised theatre production.

Below, not a theoretical overview of the scholarship on repetition or its philosophical interpretations will be offered; instead, the concept of repetition will exclusively be used in relation to theatre plays, theatre art, and more broadly, the so-called performance arts. It is a valid and viable question: whether repetition is possible at all or whether every single thing is unique and unrepeatable. "I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be?" wonders Gertrude Stein in her 1934 *Lectures in America*.⁴ Later, she adds that if, for instance, the same story is told over and over again, it takes on a different form each time. Later, Stein argues that "remembering is repetition, anybody can know that."⁵ I shall return to this hypothesis about the connection of theatre and remembrance.

² Peggy PHELAN, "The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction", in Peggy PHELAN, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 146–166 (London: Routledge, 1993), 152.

³ Edward Gordon CRAIG, "The Actor and the Über-Marionette", *The Mask* 1, no. 2 (1908): 3–16, 3.

⁴ Gertrude STEIN, *Lectures in America* (London: Virago, 1988), 166.

⁵ STEIN, *Lectures...*, 178.

From the 1960s on, the features of theatre that Craig considered its fallacies were increasingly counted as the art form's ontological characteristics. That a theatre play cannot be repeated thus became theatre's *differentia specifica*, with a novel theatre theory placing a performance's ephemeral, fleeting character in its centre. Richard Schechner began to emphasise the ephemeral nature of performance in the 1970s and played a determining role in the solidification of this theory. In 1982, Herbert Blau further accentuated the vanishing, dissolving nature of theatre performance by placing it in the subtitle of his book, *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point*. In the book itself, Blau arrived to the following definition: "In theater, as in love, the subject is disappearance."⁶ In 1993, Peggy Phelan went as far as to argue that performance "becomes itself through disappearance,"⁷ meaning that it is impossible to repeat a performance because it vanishes as soon as it takes form: "it can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as 'different.'"⁸ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett broadened the scope of ephemerality even further; she considered it a feature of all forms of live action. In 1998, she argued that "the ephemeral encompasses all forms of behavior—everyday activities, storytelling, ritual, dance, speech, performance of all kinds."⁹

As Rebecca Schneider pointed out, the above-quoted books were, without exception, written while their authors worked at New York University's Department of Performance Studies (Blau was the department's guest professor when his book was published). According to Schneider, in the 1990s, when she studied there, one of the lecturers

(not listed above) ironically suggested that the department should change its name to the Department of Ephemeral Studies.¹⁰

Obviously, Craig condemned the same feature of theatre that the researchers of New York University's Department of Performance Studies fetishized, i.e., its unrepeatability. But what is exactly unrepeatable in a theatre play, and does that differentiate it from other life events, i.e., is there such a specificity of performance arts?

The pianist and philosopher Thomas Carson Mark claims in his 2012 book that performances (like concerts) are not permanent objects but events, just like *any* action. "We may talk casually of repeating an action or a performance, but that is not really possible. We can't do the same individual action again [...]. All we can do is carry out another action similar to the first. A repeat of a performance is *another* performance."¹¹ This point of view is markedly similar to Gertrude Stein's. Yet, Mark also draws attention to the fact that the concept and praxis of repetition are still present in performance arts, as exemplified by the French word for rehearsal.

Répétition in French, just like *repetición* in Spanish, *Wiederholung* in German, and, although to a lesser extent, *repetition* in English are used both for the systematic training of performers and for theatre rehearsals. This is what Patrice Pavis put forward in his *Dictionary of the Theatre's* short, merely 16-line-long entry on "Rehearsal", quoting Peter Brook: "the French word *répétition* evokes a mechan-

⁶ Herbert BLAU, *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 94.

⁷ PHELAN, „The ontology...“, 146.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cited by Rebecca SCHNEIDER, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London–New York, Routledge,

2011), 95. Original source: Barbara KIRSCHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 30.

¹⁰ SCHNEIDER, *Performing...*, 95.

¹¹ Thomas Carson MARK, *Motion, Emotion, and Love: The Nature of Artistic Performance* (Chicago: GIA, 2012), 16.

ical kind of work, while rehearsals are always different and sometimes creative."¹²

Repetition and practice in theatre and music have a twofold meaning: they mark the process through which a piece of art emerges and may last days, weeks, or months on end; and they are the systematic repetitions through which the performers (the actors or musicians) master the actions they shall execute in a future performance. In other words, in front of the audience, the performers actually repeat something that they have already practiced beforehand.

The rehearsal (or practice) is not the only way through which repetition is present in theatre. Most modern theatre programmes are built on repetition: the same performances are played over and over again in repertoire or in en suite systems. Therefore, in principle, a performance can be watched multiple times. Can it really be?

In 2012, London's St. Martin's Theatre celebrated the diamond jubilee, i.e., the 60-year continuous run of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, advertised as the world's longest-running play. A few years ago in Budapest, the Madách Theatre's billboards and website heralded that "*The Cats* turned 30." There are numerous more present and past examples of long-running performances, so the question arises whether the audiences visiting these plays see a different performance each and every time. Did they see *The Mousetrap* or *The Cats* or didn't they? Are the performances so deeply affected by the autopoietic feedback loop that they take on a different form each and every time?

This concept, introduced by Erika Fischer-Lichte, attempts to theoretically capture the way the physical co-presence of actors and spectators affects theatre performances and allegedly turns them into different perfor-

mances each time. In *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Fischer-Lichte, echoing Peggy Phelan, arrives to the viewpoint that "the performance brings forth its materiality [...] and immediately destroys it again the moment it is created, setting in motion a continuous cycle."¹³

Yes, this may be a valid performance as an event, but not as a work of art. Besides staged crime fiction, musicals, dramas, etc. there are further theatre genres, that—though they contain no words or music, only bodily motions—can be performed and watched multiple times. Dance pieces and ballets can be repeatedly performed, though they are not recorded anywhere else but in the performers' bodies. For instance, in 2010 the Ballet Pécs staged Imre Eck's *Az iszonyat balladája* (*The Ballad of Horror*), although Eck passed away in 1999 and the piece originally premiered on January 1, 1961. The so-called revival of musical or dance pieces are actually re-stagings of earlier theatrical creations.

The view that performance is an event—and not a work of art—supports the hypothesis that performance is ephemeral. Erika Fischer-Lichte devoted a whole chapter to the characteristics of performance as an event. In order to be able to do so, she overleaped those features, which prove the presence and significance of repeatability. For instance, she argues, "we must clearly distinguish here between the intensive preparation of theatrical performances, often lasting several weeks or even months, and the performance itself."¹⁴ What she asks us to do is separate "preparation" from performance. Needless to say, "preparation" is an essential condition of performance as a work of art but not necessarily an essential condition of events. In the same chapter, Fischer-Lichte's mantra of liminality, a leitmotiv from her previous

¹² Patrice PAVIS, *Dictionary of the Theatre*, trans. Christine SHANTZ (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 308.

¹³ Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*,

trans. Saskia Iris JAIN (London–New York, Routledge, 2008), 76.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

work,¹⁵ also makes an appearance. However, when she references liminality and the rites of passage as discussed by van Gennep and Victor Turner, Fischer-Lichte forgets—or remains silent about—the fact that repetition, replay, and repeated action are essential elements of liminal processes.

Wilmar Sauter, who devoted a whole monograph to theatre as an event, also assumes a clear separation between performance as a work of art and performance as an event in order to emphasise the uniqueness of the performer-spectator interaction. According to Sauter, “together the actions and reactions constitute the theatrical event.”¹⁶ Therefore, they are unrepeatable, we may add. In which case comprehending Craig’s stance is easier: what kind of work of art is that which can be modified at will by its spectators’ intentional and unintentional reactions that can challenge even the consistency of the players’ action?

Despite various scholars’ relentless advocacy of performance’s ephemeral nature, a plethora of performances and events that allegedly vanish upon inception have been repeated in practice, as examples of both artistic and everyday nature amply evidence it. Besides the obvious examples provided by theatrical or concert repertoires, we should mention the repetitions of unique artistic events and actions, such as the 23 works of art and productions exhibited and performed as part of the *History Will Repeat Itself*¹⁷ exhibition at the KunstWerke Berlin in 2007–2008, or the series of events titled *The Artist is Present* in the New York MoMA in the spring of

2010, when past performances by Marina Abramović got revived by others. The reenactments of significant social events, such as the battles of the American Civil War and other historical occurrences, exemplify that non-artistic events may also be repeated.¹⁸

The stance about the changeable and ephemeral nature of performance opposes performance arts and theatre with art forms and human creations that exist in a tangible form. This stance suggests that the specificity and value of theatre are exactly its alleged impairments. Yet, the dichotomy, which emphasises performance’s ephemerality in opposition to other arts’ archival features, does not take two facts into consideration. Firstly, not only performances vanish but everything else does too: documents, objects, and artworks. Secondly, it assumes that without materialisation there is no remembrance, although—as Gertrude Stein emphasised—remembrance is repetition.

Evanescence, disappearance, and vanishing—despite Schechner’s, Phelan’s and Fischer-Lichte’s argumentation—are not the opposites of existence and preservation. As Rebecca Schneider pointed out, “it is one of the primary insights of poststructuralism that disappearance is that which marks *all* documents, *all* records, and *all* material remains. Indeed, remains become themselves through disappearance as well.”¹⁹ When the very special nature of performance’s evanescence gets emphasised, it is the logic of the archive that lurks beneath the argument, the logic that opposes the residue with the lost and vanished. For the quoted theatre scholars, it

¹⁵ E.g. Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, *History of European Drama and Theater*, trans. Jo RILEY (London–New York: Routledge, 2001); Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* (London–New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁶ Wilmar SAUTER, *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 11.

¹⁷ Inke ARNS and Gabriele HORN, eds., *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-Enactment*

in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2007).

¹⁸ See P. MÜLLER Péter: „Színház és háború”, in *A magyar színháztudomány kortárs irányai*, eds. BALASSA Zsófia, P. MÜLLER Péter and ROSNER Krisztina, 19–28 (Pécs: Kronosz, 2012).

¹⁹ SCHNEIDER, *Performing...*, 102.

is the lost and vanished that is valuable; for the archivist, it is always the remainder, haunted forever by what is lost. As Derrida put it, “the structure of the archive is *spectral*. It is spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent ‘in the flesh,’ neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another [...]”²⁰

The logic of the archive is apparent in the views about theatre’s ephemerality, also because it is the archivist who treasures materialised forms only; for them, bodily gestures are irrelevant. Although Erika Fischer-Lichte and the like-minded theoreticians are ostensibly on “the side of the body,” their argumentation reproduces body-negating stances. These stances hold that oration, story-telling, improvisation, or embodied ritual practices do not belong to history,²¹ because they vanish upon inception, just like the “event” of the performance.

Herein lies another contradiction. These body-based genres are passed down *through repetition*. They survive because they are repeated (told, played, done) over and over again. Still, the past that lives on in actions (as opposed to the past that lives on in written or objectified form) is often considered “mythical” or is not considered memory proper (unlike documents and objects). Oral history is characterised by performative components, variability, the aim to reconstruct, and a lack of closure.²²

In a theatre performance, gestures, genres, images, and relations repeat past gestures and actions in the present. The event of the performance is open towards evanescence but also towards the dimensions of bequeathment, preservation, and remembrance. As Rebecca Schneider put it, “when we approach performance not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as both the *act* of remaining and a means of re-appearance and ‘reparticipation’ [...] we are almost immediately forced to admit that

remains do not have to be isolated to the document, to the object, to bone versus flesh. Here the body [...] becomes a kind of archive and host to a collective memory.”²³

In other words, through the bodies involved, performance, though connected with evanescence, is also connected with viability and preservation. Moreover, performance, exactly *because* repetition is its constitutive element, challenges evanescence, impermanence, and demise.

Bequeathment is about repetition; hence, alternations and varieties are necessarily essential parts of it. Therefore, performance would never fit Craig’s ideal about the entirely self-same and unchangeable work of art, which is a typical modernist ideal that disregards an essential feature of previous eras’ artworks, i.e., that they virtually existed in varieties only. At the same time, precisely because of its repeatability, theatre performance may (also) function as a medium of remembrance and bequeathment.

Pandemic and the Death of Many

In the era of COVID-19, let me return to the issue of death, its representation, and the aspect of performative memory. An epidemic is the death of theatre. It kills the actors and the spectators. When Antonin Artaud created a symbiotic vision of theatre and pest in his Sorbonne lecture on April 6, 1933, he did not speak about plague, but he performed the agony of a person infected by plague. When two days later he sent a letter to a fellow poet, he considered his action a mixture of misunderstandings and a kind of magnificence. The paradox of Artaud’s show was not the combination of plague and theatre, but the fact that he believed he could perform an epidemic individually.

However, epidemics are multitudinous and cause the deaths of several people. It is

²⁰ Jacques DERRIDA, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric PRENOWITZ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 84.

²¹ Compare with SCHNEIDER, *Performing...*, 100.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 101.

not self-evident how an epidemic could be performed. Since the characteristic of every epidemic is that it exceeds the spatial and temporal frames, therefore, neither theatre nor a university auditorium—as in the example of Artaud—seems to be an authentic location and medium to evoke an epidemic in a performative way.

Sometime at the turn of the 19th–20th century, a new disease occurred that, at the time, was not noticed or identified, and only it became into focus in the 1980s, when dozens of young gay men died in the United States with symptoms that had not been diagnosed at such a young age. Because of their weakened immune system, old age Kaposi-sarcoma, or a rare type of pneumonia, caused their deaths. Soon the disease caused the death of a one and a half-year-old child, who had gotten a blood transfusion. This made it clear that this is an epidemic that is not determined by age, sex, or sexual orientation. The disease got the name AIDS in 1982. In the past four decades, the epidemic has infected about 75 million people, of whom more than 30 million have died. There were approximately 37.6 million people across the globe infected with AIDS in 2020.

How is it possible to erect a monument to the memory of the victims? With stone and marble, into which different characters are engraved, listing the names of the individuals? By the way, the original meaning of the word *character* was “A distinctive mark impressed, engraved, or otherwise made on a surface; a brand, stamp”.²⁴ This form of engraving can be seen on the obelisks of World War I and II or on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, with its more than 58 thousand names. This memorial was inaugurated in the year when AIDS got its name. But warfare is not an epidemic. In the case of the victims of AIDS, the idea to commemorate them with these solid materials that heroize the deceased did not occur. Nevertheless, an original and radical solution was

created to preserve and evoke the memory of those who died of AIDS in a performative way.

Victims of this pandemic were not considered heroes, just the opposite. Many of them did not even get a funeral service because, as a result of the social stigmatisation both their families and the undertakers refused to touch the corpse. In San Francisco, gay-rights activist Cleve Jones was the first to make a quilt in 1987 to commemorate his deceased friend, Marvin Feldman. This gesture of commemoration has soon taken on the nature of an epidemic. The six-foot-long and three-foot-wide single blanket sewed by Jones became an example that started to spread and expand quickly. Recently, the *NAMES project* has become the biggest community “folk art” on the globe with its more than fifty thousand pieces and 54 tonnes of weight. Every quilted blanket commemorates a fellow human being who died of AIDS. Currently, there are more than a hundred thousand of them. On one quilt, there can be more victims mentioned and commemorated. Although these quilts have a spatial limit, their performative exhibition is in motion, similarly to a spreading pandemic.

These individual objects of remembrance, which spread alongside the pandemic but never reached its numbers, but receive widespread publicity from time to time. These objects take the stage, always in a performative way, combining several different ritual and theatrical gestures. The first public exhibition of the *NAMES project* took place in the capital of the United States on the grounds of the National Mall in 1987, where the project has returned repeatedly, commemorating more and more individual victims. The “memorial” consisting of the quilted blankets has been exhibited in many other cities; for instance, in the wide public areas of Chicago, Columbus (OH), Atlanta, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, and besides, in other countries, thousands of quilts are exhibited in public year by

²⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*; www.oed.com.

year; that is, the panel elements sewn together wander all around the Earth as a virus.

Before these quilts appear in public, their preparation includes bodily intimacy. While the grave is normally not dug by the relatives, it is not them who carve the gravestone; these quilts are made by the hand of those left behind, and these blankets do not follow a trend or fashion, but they give an individual print of a person and a relationship.

The blankets themselves would be neither theatrical nor performative. But their mass exhibition and the fact that these objects can be viewed in public include theatricality. During a performative occupation of space, the people placing the quilts move with choreographed gestures they compose in a ceremonial way not only their spatial network but also the particular location of each quilt. During the placement of the blankets, several hundred or even thousand participants move in the monumental space, which is structured for a couple of days by the several thousand quilts. The spectacle—the laying out of the blankets—is supplemented by an acoustic dimension, the litany-like enumeration of the dead people commemorated on these textiles. If we think of the number of victims, it is not a surprise that the reading of the names might take several days, even the entire duration of the exhibition. On the podium for the speakers, dozens and dozens of readers follow each other. Meanwhile, on the paths between the blankets, the “visitors” flow into the space and they cannot be called spectators any more. They become participants who belong not to a regular “road movie”, but are now part of a “road cemetery”, where the living visit the dead.

This pandemic monument expresses not only the experience of temporariness, but such individual gestures of the personal are present here that cannot be seen neither on the official memorials nor in public cemeteries. There is no standard, no fixed formula to characterize the tombstones with their full

name and the year of birth and death. Instead of these, there are nicknames, intimate names, and mentions of hobbies, passions, and desires. This is why it can happen that the same first name (only that) appears on several dozen quilts, but every Jim or Tom refers to different individuals. The name preserves how the deceased person was called by the partner or lover who sewed the blanket. As it happens too, the name of an individual can appear on many quilts. Like Michel Foucault’s, who died of AIDS in 1984.

Beside collecting the quilts, the NAMES project collects other things. It has its own archive, where currently there are more than 200,000 documents and objects, including biographical notes, letters, photographs, obituaries, and many more. Because of the unavoidable institutionalisation, the project moved to a permanent location in San Francisco, not giving up the regular exhibition of the quilts. The written documents collected in the archive nowadays are preserved in the Library of Congress. “In 2020, during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic [...], the National AIDS Memorial launched a first-ever 50 State virtual exhibition of the Quilt, bringing the power and beauty of the Quilt to communities across the nation and world to help with the healing process and loss people were facing in the wake of another devastating pandemic.”²⁵

As I already brought up the word *character* and its original meaning—from which the concept of the individual features of a person developed—it is appropriate to return to this phrase at the end of this paper. By this, I evoke how the essence of the NAMES project is summarised in Elinor Fuchs’ book, *The Death of Character*. She wrote:

“The AIDS Quilt occupies a unique position among the cultural performances of contemporary America. It is at once a cultural expression with roots in traditional, rural, American artistic and social

²⁵ <https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history>

life, and an act of countercultural resistance, related to the guerrilla theatre “die-ins” staged by Act Up. Its four complete appearances in Washington, D.C. were theatrical at every level, from the material details of performance stitched into its panels, to its mode of presentation, to the ways, both sublime and subversive, in which it linked communities of gay and straight, conservative and radical, living and dead.”²⁶

In the case of the NAMES project, the blankets represent the archived bodies, made of materials that are as vanishing as the human body. This seeming disadvantage of the quilts—that they are not made of lasting materials, as opposed to tombstones and mausoleums—make it possible to handle them in a flexible way and to exhibit them from time to time, from place to place. This repeated public appearance and performative placement can paradoxically combine the seemingly contradictory dimensions of dying, vanishing, and archiving.

When Jacques Derrida wrote about theatre in connection with Artaud’s views, he considered the representational function of the theatre problematic. Because it is based on

“the act of signifying something absent from the event, as a mimetic image of thought or action; the act of symbolizing a transcendental idea, text, or ‘message’ to be conveyed, whose reality is external to the performance itself. [...] Thus, one of the problems of mimetic representation, according to Derrida, is the fixed condition of theatrical

meanings and the static character of theatrical forms that it perpetuates.”²⁷

What else can be farther from the living presence than death, which—in spite of this distance—is regularly represented on the stage?

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²⁶ Elinor FUCHS, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 15. Act Up was an activist movement against AIDS. One can get informed about their activity—among others—from this volume: Benita ROTH, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA: Anti-AIDS Activism in Los*

Angeles from the 1980s to the 2000s (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²⁷ Spyros PAPAIOANNOU, „Mapping the ‘Non-representational’: Derrida and Artaud’s Metaphysics of Presence in Performance Practice”, *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 14, no. 4 (2018): 1–19, 9.

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