

Soft Machines: Kettle Logic and The Gale Maze

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Declaration of Committee

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Abstract

Soft Machines: Kettle Logic and The Gale Maze is an interdisciplinary lecture-performance about death, Persian men, language and thought. A performance that attempts to use the elements of theatre in order to resist the apparatus of North American theatre production and spectatorship. The protagonist of the performance duplicates himself in order to have more hands to make the performance function more smoothly. *Soft Machines* uses stand-up, video projection, text (visual), documents, music and non-performativity to create an awkward encounter for its audience. A Performance without Organs that leaves the anticipation of the audience dissatisfied as it polymorphically changes the content and the style. A rhizome on the stage which allows this medley of ideas and materials to clash.

Keywords: Soft Machines; Persian; Interdisciplinary Performance; Rhizome; Performance Without Organs; Bwo

Not all wanderers wander.

**To my family Darya, Robab and Sattar who support me from afar.
To Nil who would be the first person to listen to my ideas.**

**To Yashar and Roulla whom I do not know when I will see again,
and to Cafe Exit.**

Acknowledgements

In crafting this thesis and presenting it as my final project, I recognize that my academic journey has taken place on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples, including the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. I am an immigrant to this land, and I wish to acknowledge the profound privilege and responsibility that comes with conducting research and creative work in this context.

This territory has been home to Indigenous communities for countless generations, and their connection to this land is inseparable from its history. I respect their enduring presence and their contributions to the rich tapestry of life in this region.

As an immigrant, I am acutely aware of the importance of recognizing and honoring the rights, culture, and history of the Indigenous peoples whose lands I reside and study on. I acknowledge the need for reconciliation, understanding, and unity in the ongoing journey toward justice and mutual respect.

In presenting this thesis, I do so with gratitude for the opportunity to learn and grow on this land. I am committed to approaching my academic and creative work with a genuine appreciation for the Coast Salish peoples and their profound heritage. I invite you to engage with the ideas and findings within this thesis, with the understanding that they are informed by the land on which they were developed and the Indigenous knowledge that has shaped this place. Thank you for considering my work, and I look forward to any discussions it may spark.

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Glossary

Arborescent Arborescent refers to a tree-like or hierarchical structure. In the context of philosophy, especially as discussed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, it is used to criticize rigid and hierarchical systems of thought and organization, contrasting them with more decentralized and non-hierarchical structures.

Body without Organs (BwO) The "Body without Organs" is a concept from the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. It represents a state of existence or a dimension of reality that is not structured, organized, or stratified. It is a way of looking at the body, desire, and social systems without preconceived forms or limitations.

Desire Desire is a fundamental concept that encompasses a range of life forces and flows. It is not limited to human wants or needs but extends to the creative and productive forces of the universe. Deleuze's notion of desire challenges traditional views of desire as lack and explores desire as a positive and generative force.

Desiring-Production Desiring-production is another concept from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy. It refers to the continuous and creative process of desire, which is not limited to individual wants but extends to the generation and expression of desires within the larger social and cultural context. It challenges conventional views of desire and production as separate processes.

Rhizome In the context of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, a rhizome is a metaphor for a non-hierarchical, interconnected, and multiplicitous network or system. It contrasts with the arborescent or tree-like structure, emphasizing the interconnectedness and multiple entry points in complex systems, such as thought or social organization.

Defence Statement

Introduction

During my undergraduate studies, I specialized in stage design, a field that initially captured my interest. However, my fascination with dance and theoretical aspects of performance emerged at a time when dance was prohibited in Iran. This restriction prompted me to explore the creative possibilities inherent in dance, which subsequently led me to apply these ideas to the realm of theatre. In my artistic practice, I employ a multidisciplinary approach, intertwining various threads drawn from disparate domains, including philosophy, linguistics, dance, music, urban life, sports, design, politics, and the dynamics of social circles.

The dramaturgical tradition through which I learned to structure and contextualize artistic elements predominantly stems from European Contemporary Dance and Post dramatic theatre. This tradition, when applied to my work, is further informed by a nuanced layer of influence rooted in misinterpretations and mistranslations of texts in Farsi, reflecting the interplay of cross-cultural artistic elements within my creative framework. In my artistic practice, I adopt a methodological approach centered on the design and dramaturgical curation of spaces. These spaces serve as foundational canvases within which artists draw inspiration from nascent concepts and raw materials. This creative process integrates both literary devices and technological tools as integral components to facilitate and enhance the transformative potential of the artistic endeavor.

In a thought-provoking presentation by Justine A. Chambers, held at the Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, a unique approach to the convergence of personal and artistic realms was unveiled. As part of the Performance Chats series curated by Ryan Tacatta, Chambers challenged conventional presentation methods. Instead of relying on visual displays of her works, she engaged her audience from the intimate vantage point of the theatre lounge, seated at the edge of the stage platform. Her discourse spanned a wide spectrum of themes, encompassing dance, the human body, motherhood, magic, and the evocation of enchantment in the context of audience engagement. One standout feature of her

presentation was her grandmother's memorable catchphrase, "Ya feel me?" This profound integration of personal narratives with artistic practice resonated with the approach employed by Peter Dickinson in his book *My Vancouver Dance History*, demonstrating the value of dedicated practice in artistic expression.

Across my seven-year journey in the domains of dance and theatre, my stance on traditional rehearsals remained marked by a distinct aversion. This perspective took root following my 2016 performance, *Prometheus 2.0*, where technical challenges and artistic choices frequently rendered rehearsals inconsequential. The belief that foregoing rehearsals imbued performances with a heightened sense of authenticity became ingrained.

However, a significant epiphany occurred during the initial year of my Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program. It became evident that the methodologies and principles that had previously guided my creative endeavours were no longer effective, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Charged with the task of presenting in the CA 883-5 Studio in Contemporary Arts under the guidance of Judy Radul, I initially planned to unveil a gradual progression of a dance performance every three weeks. While the concept was sound, organizational challenges and collaborative limitations presented hurdles.

Amid this period of creative stagnation, I sought solace in extended walks along Capilano Road in North Vancouver. These solitary excursions offered moments of introspection as I grappled with the challenges of being far from home, navigating a long-distance relationship, and adapting to the immigrant experience. During these contemplative moments, the words of Yashar, a friend and anthropologist with a Nietzschean philosophical orientation, resurfaced in my thoughts. He had once noted, "Shervin, you're a good thief," and encouraged me to embrace the creativity of my inner child, advising against its restraint. Recollections of my first fortune cookie, received on September 30th, 2021, following a dress rehearsal for *Wakey, Wakey* at Pacific Theatre, further invigorated my resolve. The fortune inside read: "Whistle all you want."



Figure 1. Whistle all you want.

Inspired by this revelation, I decided to fully channel my creative energy. I approached Radul and proposed moving my presentation date from February 18th to February 11th, with the intention of delivering an unscripted lecture-performance titled *A Brief, Fragmented, and Personal History of 43 Years of the Islamic Republic*. This presentation, timed to coincide with the 43rd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in 2022, remained unrehearsed and unrecorded. It took the form of a multimedia presentation interwoven with historical imagery, footage, music, live performance, scenography, and my presence seated on a borrowed faux Persian rug. I recounted stories passed down from my mother, detailing the involvement of my uncles in activism and politics, stories I had kept concealed for years.

This experiential awakening underscored the importance of crafting transparent and personal narratives while scrutinizing history devoid of nostalgia and adopting a more materialistic approach. My objective was to adopt a Benjaminian approach to understanding 43 years of history in the span of a single hour, assuming the role of the "angel of history," who is propelled into the future by a turbulent storm while gazing back at the wreckage of the past, unable to intervene or fully comprehend (Benjamin, 1940).

The lecture-performance format became an essential component of my creative journey. Drawing from diverse performances witnessed in Tehran, marked by unique forms yet united by the shared philosophy that performance is a mode of thinking, I continued to explore its potential. This led to experiments with the monobloc chair, an object symbolizing democracy and mass production that, as a stage design enthusiast, I found versatile and contextless. Its presence could transcend temporal and spatial confines, fitting seamlessly into various settings, from Chekhov's estate in *The Seagull* to Janine and Simon's journey in Wajdi Muawad's *Incendies*.

In the course of my studies, I began collaborating with Charlotte Samuel with the goal of finding a dance partner for them. Although we did not achieve the intended objective, our creative process evolved into an exploration of the process itself. With no predetermined framework, our rehearsals remained open to diverse possibilities, fostering extensive conversations on topics ranging from performance art to personal stress, and even the cities of Los Angeles and Pasadena. In the absence of a clear artistic direction, I adhered to João Fiadeiro's Real-Time Composition method, guided by the fundamental principle of knowing what I didn't want and retaining what remained ("Real Time Composition Introduction by João Fiadeiro (2010)" 2020). I did not want to limit my creative process to a singular idea, preferring to develop the form while incorporating elements that defied conventional dramaturgical structure.



Figure 2. Still from video art with Charlotte Samuel

This perspective led to the inclusion of everything that emerged during our collaborative process within the performance itself. Guided by questions in the style of Deborah Hay's 'What if' inquiries, we preserved writings on studio walls, compiled a playlist, and choreographed movements inspired by principles of physics. The result was a diverse lecture-performance, featuring writings, physics formulas, philosophical diagrams, artist names, pre-recorded music, dance sequences, pseudo-dance elements, video art, and personal reflections. The monobloc chair, now transformed into a mobile entity with wheels and motors, remained an integral presence. The show, aptly titled "Gesamtkunstwerk: or How I Learned to Choose a Short Title for My Work," epitomized a do-it-yourself total work of art, self-referentially acknowledging its multidisciplinary character.

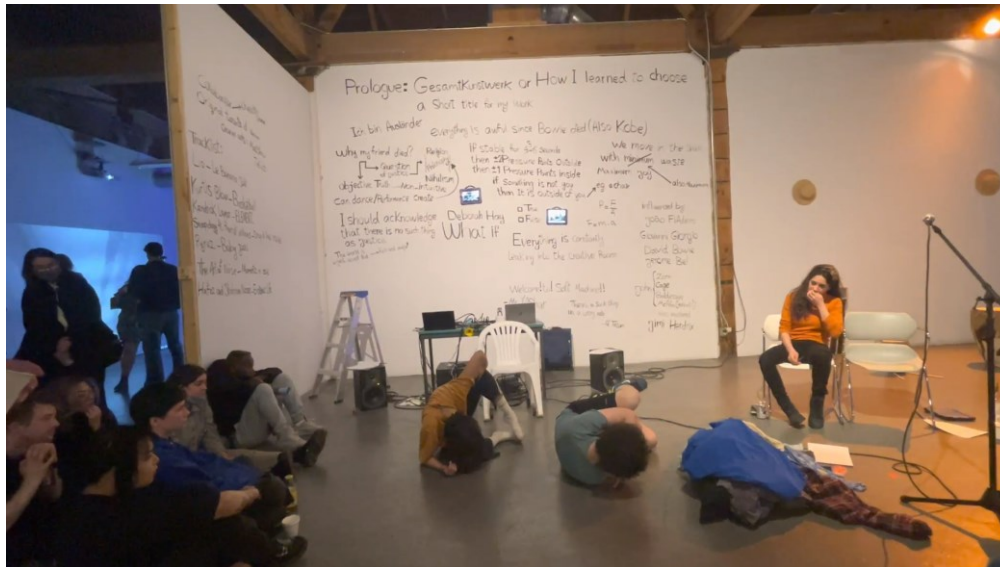


Figure 3. Still from video of P:GOHILTCASTFMW, Samuel and Zarkalam dancing.

1.1. Context and Theories

During my MFA journey, the process of creating my performance evolved significantly. I initially worked with the concept of fragments and fragmentation. However, after feedback sessions and studio visits, I encountered terms such as multiplicity, Deleuzian, rhizomes, and rhizomatic. This led me to dive into the works of Deleuze and Guattari, particularly focusing on *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Their ideas about rhizomes and rhizomatic thinking helped me make sense of our Spring Show performance. Instead of seeing the messiness as fragments, I realized that these elements are whole things that were interconnected in a rhizomatic manner.

During studio visits with Kirsty Trinier, Rob Kitsos, Wlad Woyno, and Dave Biddle, as well as numerous discussions with Tim McCall, Ido Radon, and Stefan Maier, I clarified my artistic goals. I aimed to provide the audience with an experience that constantly introduced new forms, ideas, and concepts throughout the performance. Non-linearity, simultaneity, changes in context, and defamiliarization were the primary tools for achieving these encounters. The key was to disrupt the audience's expectations and subvert the performance's own subversions.

When the time came to submit my MFA project proposal, I needed a title for the envisioned performance. I typically finalize the title after creating the performance, as I believe names have a substantial impact on the creative process. Eventually, I settled on the title *Soft Machines: Kettle Logic and The Gale Maze*. The name *Soft Machines* (which we are going to use because it is shorter) was inspired by the British psychedelic rock band Soft Machine. It reminded me of discussions with Yashar, who would play Soft Machine's music and encourage me to read specific Nietzschean passages, all while sharing insights on their interest in improvisation and their Dionysian nature. We also concurred with Nietzsche's view that acting is inherently suppressing one's true self.



Figure 4. Shervin and Yashar at Cafe Exit

I grasped the concept of the rhizome, drawing from Saussurean Semiotics, specifically examining the Signifier and Signified as core sign components. In the context of the theatrical performance, I considered each scene, and even individual ideas within these scenes, as rhizomes representing signs. While the event on stage (the signifier) is clear, the elusive nature of what it signifies (the signified) is less significant in terms of dramaturgy. Instead, the focus lies in the complex relationships among signifiers, rather

than their specific meanings, challenging the conventional delivery of a central message in a linear, hierarchical manner.

Comparatively, the rhizome and Saussure's Sign are linked in today's context, as signifiers are no longer bound to single signified but are connected to evolving meanings due to societal shifts, technological advances, and radical philosophies. For example, the term "mother" no longer exclusively refers to biological maternity but encompasses diverse gender identities and roles in nurturing a child. In line with my interpretation of the rhizome, connections between arbitrary points are transient, fostering new associations or reverting to previous ones. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7)

In the performance's dramaturgy, scene-specific content takes a backseat to the broader structural form discerned through thematic content. The performance avoids the conventional narrative structure that branches out and returns to a central theme hierarchically.

Many scenes employ ready-made media in a parodic manner, leveraging intertextual references to prompt audience inquiry. Though inundating the audience with references and data may seem disorienting, this intentional disorientation motivates the audience to make sense of the non-linear sequencing, grappling with the absence of an arborescent structure.

Two pivotal concepts that have both elucidated and complicated the creative process are the 'Body Without Organs' and 'Desiring-Production.' The Body Without Organs challenges established structures within the human body and, by extension, societal and institutional frameworks. Deleuze and Guattari contend that these conventional structures, whether anatomical, social, or psychological, restrict human potential and creativity. The Body Without Organs embodies a realm of unadulterated potentiality and deterritorialization, liberating individuals from fixed roles, identities, and structures. (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 11)

In our artistic performance, the Body Without Organs is not a mere symbolic representation or theme. We did not seek to employ it in *Soft Machines* as a direct embodiment of Deleuze and Guattari's concept. Instead, we utilized it as a systemic element shaping the meta-theatrical aspects of the show, contributing to the idea of unmediated encounters, transcending mere representation.

In their work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari link the notion of desiring-production to their critique of capitalism. They argue that capitalism orchestrates and directs desire to sustain its social and economic hierarchies. They view schizophrenia as a potential response to these repressive structures, representing a dissolution of conventional subjectivity and the release of suppressed desires.

In our context, the repressive structure pertains to the theatrical apparatus and its institutional mechanisms. The means through which we resist and ideally disrupt this structure is through the concept of the Body Without Organs.

Soft Machines draws inspiration from Iranian artists like Golrokh Nafisi and Mohammad Abbasi, who presented a performative lecture at RoobeRoo Mansion in 2017, delving into their career-long dialogues on performance, space, and politics. The engagement of the audience, the use of simple objects to maintain focus, and the discussion of art's socio-political role in the city all inform the planning of this show. Regrettably, no documentation exists for this performance due to its unique medium and manifesto.

The *Bodiless Heads*, an ongoing project since 2017 by Setareh Fatehi and Shahrzad Irannejad comprises a series of lecture performances, serving as a metaphor, hypothesis, and an exploration of intricate cultural customs that have evolved over time, particularly within Iran's cultural borders. This project draws on a stream of information exchange stemming from research on the history of medicine, philosophy, literature, and the media, accumulated over numerous workshops and lectures. It provides a valuable source for studying methodology and finding a balance between artistic creativity and philosophical texts.

I would also connect the meta-dramaturgy of *Soft Machines* to *How Heavy Are My Thoughts?* by Ivana Müller (2004) and *Nom donné par l'auteur* (1994) by Jérôme Bel. The first, Müller searches for a response to the query, "If my thoughts are heavier than usual, is my head heavier than usual too?" and she explores this question throughout multiple videotaped experiments, and it is presented as a lecture by someone other than Ivana Müller herself. (Manning and Ruprecht 2012, 232)

The latter, which is Bel's debut work, is a dance performance characterized by the objectification and refining of dance and theatre conventions. Moving objects around the stage is the only job assigned to Frédéric Seguet and Jérôme Bel, the two dancers, during the performance. By assuming this posture, the dancers adopt a sober and neutral demeanor in which no emotions or effects are expressed. (Siegmund 2017, 56)

Both these performances share this quality of performance which Bel named it as non-dance. A performative state for the performer which is dependent on both amateurism and the intention of breaking the theatrical way of being on a theatrical stage. They both also perform ludicrous actions in a rather serious and professional manner which gives a comic quality to the work.

1.2. Process

Our process commenced with dialogue, reminiscent of a prior performance experience in Tehran when I was directing *Theatre Government* during the International Student Theatre Festival. Conversations in English added a unique dimension, challenging my exploration of theoretical concepts as a non-native English speaker. Furthermore, we conducted our discussions in a studio, and not from my family's living room in Tehran, offering access to equipment that was previously either unavailable or prohibitively expensive due to sanctions against Iran by the U.S., UK, EU, and SWIFT.

From the outset, a fundamental consensus emerged: we sought to avoid traditional 'acting' or 'role-playing.' Colleen Bayati and Tim McCall posed a pivotal question: "How can we embody Shervin without engaging in traditional acting?" While initially challenging to articulate a response, we soon realized, through various rehearsal exercises, that the

multiple Shervins were not representations of my personality or my complete being. Instead, they served as functional elements, a revelation that significantly influenced our performance approach.

During my two years in the MFA program, I had the opportunity to serve as a teaching assistant in the CA 285 Interdisciplinary Studio Composition/Collaboration course, taught by Mauricio Pauly and Rob Kitsos. Over the three semesters of collaboration, we engaged in discussions on education, pedagogy, collaboration, methods, and playfulness, sharing thoughts, presenting diverse materials to one another, and involving the class.

Influenced by the pedagogical methods explored in the class, we decided to transform our rehearsal space to mirror the classroom environment. We incorporated microphones, TVs, projectors, and cameras, which in turn influenced the performance's aesthetic, featuring equipment carts and cables strewn across the stage.



Figure 5. Rehearsal for Soft Machines with Bayati, McCall, and Samadi

In the early stages of our process, we integrated the use of handheld microphones into our rehearsals, conditioning ourselves for their continuous use during the performance. To further enhance the performative aspects of our work, I ensured that each rehearsal included a camera recording or projecting a live feed on a wall. We also benefited from the perspective of Niloufar Samadi, who served as our external observer.

Our approach was grounded in the acknowledgment that 'being seen on stage' transforms one's presence into a performative state, the nature of which varies from person to person. Consequently, an essential part of our rehearsals involved acclimating Bayati and McCall to constant visibility.

Rather than projecting into the future, we centered our process on embracing the present, working with materials, engaging in discussions, crafting texts, humor, and ideas, and devising a script. Bayati and McCall not only assumed performing roles but also functioned as creators and editors of the performance itself. McCall contributed monologues and analyzed various sections of our script, while Bayati designed the lighting and played a central role in structuring our creative process.



Figure 6. Bayati exercising presenting an object.

In the subsequent phase of rehearsals, focused on building structures and performing our accumulated work, Irfan Brkovic joined as a collaborator and projection designer. Collaborating with Brkovic brought both advantages and challenges. He drew inspiration from the materials and situations we had created, infusing the performance with bursts of creativity. This not only elevated the visual aspects but also influenced dramaturgical

decisions. Brkovic later proposed performing live music at the end of the show, a proposal I welcomed in line with my practice's principles of allowing artists to create, expand, and exercise autonomy.

1.3. The work

The attempt to write and describe *Soft Machines* in a linear way feels paradoxical to me, if I write it scene by scene and interpret it myself, then I would have betrayed my own artwork because the nature of the performance is not an arborescent one, therefore the reading of should not be arborescent as well. Also, if as the creator of this particular performance I start interpreting what are the ‘meanings’ of each thing, I either carnage the magic of the ‘*objet trouvé*’ and the ready-made and aleatoric aspects of the performance.

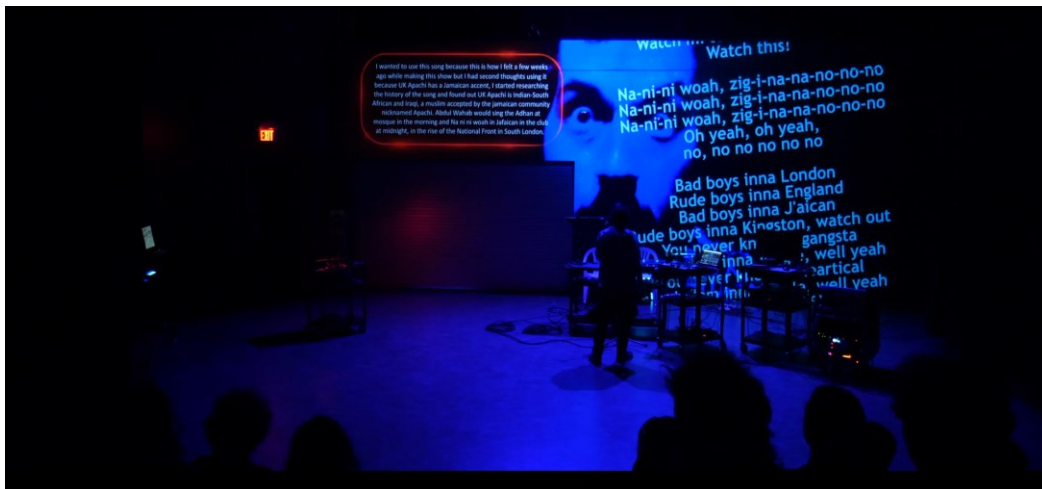


Figure 7. Zarkalam performing karaoke of Original Nuttah by UK Apache and Shy FX

Nonetheless, I aim to highlight key concepts and recurring themes in the performance. The performance heavily features monologues and stand-up segments, addressing the complex ideas of ethnicity and race. Instead of offering clear-cut definitions of Iranian and Persian identities, it opts for a more creative approach, using humor, video content, and gestures to delve into the Iranian mindset.

In contemplating *Soft Machines*, a noteworthy aspect emerges—its utilization of a multi-purpose studio. This adaptable space allows for dynamic alterations in seating arrangements, lighting, and stage configuration. However, it introduces a paradox: *Soft Machines*, aspiring to be anti-theatrical, opts for a frontal presentation reminiscent of traditional theater, with the audience on one side and performers on the stage. This deliberate choice unveils a reflection on the untapped potential inherent in the multi-purpose studio. Despite its inherent flexibility, the performance retains a theatrical setup, introducing a subtle contradiction between its quest for an avant-garde experience and its adherence to conventional theatrical norms. In acknowledging this paradox, it becomes evident that *Soft Machines* had the potential to be introduced in another manner, exploring a different type of performance. This opportunity, however, was missed, evoking Nietzsche's cautionary insight about gazing too long into the abyss: *"He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you."*

Importantly, The monologues written for the performance deviate from the prevailing progressive neo-liberal approach to how ethnic and racial minorities should define themselves and perform in society. Instead, they navigate the nuanced territory of social interactions that carry ethnic undertones, sidestepping conventional categorizations. This approach sheds light on the intricacies of identity, challenging established norms, especially in a contemporary context marked by evolving and multifaceted ideas about ethnicity and race.

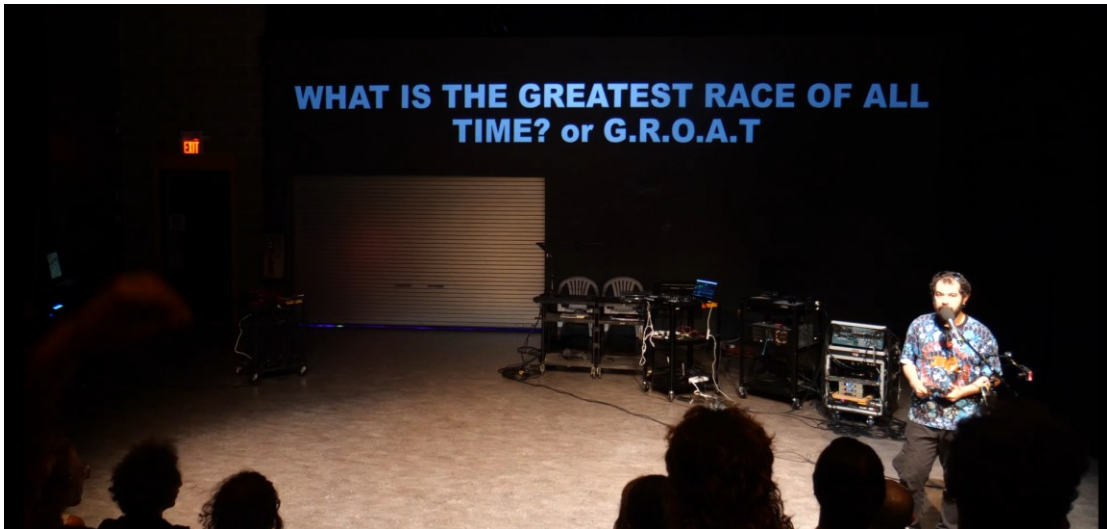


Figure 8. Zarkalam delivering monolog in *Soft Machines*.



Figure 9. Zarkalam delivering monolog while Bayati and McCall idle.

These ideas are closely entwined and expanded upon in the documentary sequence performed by the alternate Shervins. This sequence draws its inspiration from Documentary Theatre and *Since I Can Remember* by the Wooster Group, a reinterpretation of *Nayatt School*.

Within this documentary-style performance, an argument is presented, characterized by incomplete thoughts and articulations. This is where the concept of ‘kettle logic’ is

employed, forming a fallacious connection between 'Persian men' and 'death.' This scene serves to explore the intricate and ambiguous facets of Persian men's identity and their perceived insignificance.



Figure 10. Bayati and McCall performing documentary theatre style.

This theme of insignificance is further emphasized when the documentary features a video segment titled 'Honorable Mentions of Iranian Death.' This segment humorously underscores the universal inevitability of mortality, regardless of one's ethnic or gender identity.

The pervasive presence of the monobloc chair emerges as a prominent motif threaded throughout the performance, resonating within both the physical stage setting and various video segments. It is a symbol that evolves in significance as the narrative unfolds. Initially, the motif manifests with the placement of two monobloc chairs at the stage's periphery. These chairs serve as precursors to an essential moment when one of them takes center stage in a video depicting a stabbing scene, where it is metaphorically propelled into the cosmos, akin to a rocket.

Subsequently, this motif takes on multifaceted roles. The two chairs initially placed on the stage become integral to a documentary scene, thereby adding layers of thematic

depth to their presence. As the performance progresses, the motif reappears, this time as an emblem adorning Shervin's T-shirt, featured in a video that accompanies a singing of translation of a Tehran folklore song into English by the performers through a call-and-response format. This recurrence and reinterpretation of the motif imbues the monobloc chair with an evolving dramatic potential, hinting at an imminent release of its dramaturgical implications.

In a climactic turn, the performance's ending revisits the motif, interweaving it with cosmic imagery as the chair reenters the stage. Here, it engages in a choreography reminiscent of a lunar rover, thereby symbolizing the culmination of its role within the performance and the artistic journey as a whole. This recurring motif serves not only as a thematic throughline but also as a visual symbol whose import deepens and transforms as the performance progresses.

The chair serves as a rhizomatic connection to the representation of Persian identity on the stage, emphasizing the absence of explicit contextualization. Instead, the goal is to immerse the audience in the cognitive processes of a Persian individual. The chair does not rigidly define a specific place or time, and the performer's identification with Persian identity is not solely rooted in colonized historical dimension or a newer and still colonized neo-liberal viewpoint; rather, it seeks to establish relevance with contemporary events and happenings. As Giorgio Agamben puts it “The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness.”



Figure 11. Ending scene with robotic monobloc chair

An aspect worth addressing is the interplay between the stage's aesthetics and the politics of mise-en-scène. Thematically, the stage assumes the appearance of a creative laboratory, replete with an array of carts, devices, and the intricacies of entangled cables. The presence of a garage door and the manifestation of alternate Shervins, coupled with the introduction of the robotic monobloc chair, further underscore this experimental atmosphere. Notably, this inclination toward experimentation with and upon the performers emerged during the process. As McCall likened our process to a Petri dish, with the director acting as the deviser, introducing and testing various elements and methodologies throughout rehearsals.

However, from a dramaturgical standpoint, the inclusion of all the requisite equipment on stage served a critical purpose. In order to authentically convey the experience of encountering a Persian thought process to the audience, the production always necessitated the simultaneous unfolding of at least two layers of events. It was a deliberate decision not to conceal the labor inherent in the performance, as the project sought to subvert conventional theatrical paradigms by employing the very components of the theatrical medium itself.

1.4. Reflection

Reflecting upon the process and performance during the MFA festival, two pragmatic objectives were pursued and successfully attained. The primary objective centered on an intensified commitment to rehearsal, thus rejecting the notion that the unexplored or unconventional inherently embodies a greater degree of authenticity. This position was grounded in the understanding that authenticity alone holds limited value if it does not engender a tangible impact upon the audience.

The second aim involved a profound shift towards wholehearted engagement with the creative process, as opposed to fixating on a predetermined and prefabricated artistic image while fervently seeking its realization in the future. This realization underscored the futility of expecting uniform outcomes from performers, recognizing that they constitute distinct artistic elements. It became evident that performers operate as unique nodes within a rhizomatic structure, each bringing diverse materials and tools to the collaborative artistic endeavor.

From an artistic standpoint, *Soft Machines* gratified my artistic desires that had been suppressed during my time in Tehran. These desires were constrained by a confluence of factors, encompassing logistical hindrances arising from restricted access to resources and exorbitant equipment costs attributable to international sanctions imposed on Iran. Furthermore, these artistic aspirations were intricately entwined with personal impediments, emotional complexities, and psychological restraints that remained suppressed amid a backdrop of stringent censorship, curtailed freedoms, and limited avenues for unrestricted self-expression and free speech.

Soft Machines can be interpreted as a maximalist endeavor, where various individual projects coexist within. This collaborative work with Bayati, Brkovic, and Samadi has allowed us to establish a coherent working language and delineate the boundaries of our collaborative dynamics. The resulting output exceeded our initial expectations. This experience also opens the door to smaller, stylistically similar projects that maintain the

engagement with the audience. Additionally, the prospect of forming a collective or company with these collaborators is worth considering, given the insights and experiences gained from this project.

Undoubtedly, this creative journey has taught me important lessons that I would keep in mind if I could go back in time. A prominent issue that consistently emerged during the process pertained to the organizational structure. In my role as the director, it has become apparent that a more deliberate delegation of organizational responsibilities would have been prudent, as opposed to embracing a somewhat disorganized and informal approach to production.

It is evident that a more harmonious balance could have been struck between the requisite administrative tasks, including meetings and correspondence, which occasionally became excessively bureaucratic, and the core creative processes that remained our central focus. Achieving such alignment necessitates a more streamlined and efficient organizational framework, one that is conducive to unhindered exploration of creative realms.

From an artistic perspective, let us consider the final monologue in the performance. It was written the night before the opening, which was not our usual process. Typically, I'd start with something raw and edgy, discuss it with Bayati and McCall over a few weeks, and refine it to capture the core ideas we wanted. Unfortunately, we had to cut an entire scene just a week before the opening, which left us with limited time for our usual refinement process.



Figure 12. Still from archival videos of Soft Machines rehearsals, Bayati, McCall and Zarkalam discussing the texts.

The monologue did achieve the discussions we aimed for, but its tone did not quite match the intended concept. It should probably have been more about raising questions for the audience rather than presenting a specific viewpoint. In the end, it ended up somewhere in between. Some people understood our intentions and felt its impact, while others found it a bit dissonant.

Thinking about Soft Machines, there is a notable point about its original aim. It wanted to create confusion and ambiguity throughout its performance. However, it seems this goal did not quite work out. Despite trying to make things random, the performance ended up having a clear theme. This theme came from monologues addressing societal issues with moral ambiguity, diverting from the initial plan to have an uncertain atmosphere.

The critique on Soft Machines brings up interesting questions about unintended societal meanings in the performance. It unintentionally shifted from creating a mysterious atmosphere to shedding light on important societal issues. This dual nature, trying to address societal gray areas while aiming for mystery, complicates Soft Machines' original goal to be anti-thematic.

Digging deeper, there is a discussion about the last monologue being self-referential. While it comments on theater, there is a suggestion that it missed an opportunity. There is potential in exploring cynicism and emotion without sticking to a script. This could involve using a real-time composition method, allowing for a more spontaneous exploration of space and time during the performance.

As I near the culmination of my MFA journey, I am genuinely content with the rich array of books and profound concepts I've encountered. This educational voyage has also afforded me the opportunity to experiment with various software applications and equipment that had long piqued my curiosity. To be candid, I had never envisaged myself engrossed in the works of Deleuze and Guattari, crafting scripts for performances, or gaining proficiency in audio gear operation, not to mention the unexpected venture into constructing a robotic entity.

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Appendix A.

How to “Agir sens rien faire”?: Reading Fiadeiro’s Method of Real-Time Composition with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the body without organs

Shervin Zarkalam

“To prevent habit from manifesting itself when facing a new situation it should be sufficient to recognize the obvious: that in the face of the unknown, resorting to codes and conventions already tested is a contradiction.” -João Fiadeiro

On December 1st, 2022, Marc Andreessen posted a screenshot of a conversation on Twitter that was created by an artificial intelligence bot from OpenAI. The AI has been asked to write a scene from a play that is a conversation on free speech between a New York Time journalist and a Silicon Valley tech entrepreneur. The AI decided that this conversation takes place in a “trendy cafe” in San Francisco and the conversation looks like any other typical conversation on Twitter or CNN and Fox, with the same repetitive arguments and language that live in a limited ideological spectrum. So repetitive that we can teach an AI how to argue on our behalf.



Marc Andreessen ✓

@pmarca



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Write a scene from a play starring a New York Times journalist and a silicon valley tech entrepreneur. They are arguing about free speech, and each passionately asserts the view associated with his profession and social circle.



Scene: A trendy café in San Francisco. A New York Times journalist and a Silicon Valley tech entrepreneur sit across from each other at a small table, both looking heated and passionate.



Journalist: Listen, I understand that free speech is important to you and your industry. But there's a difference between free speech and hate speech. We can't just let people say whatever they want without consequences.

Tech Entrepreneur: But that's exactly what free speech is about! The whole point is to allow people to express themselves without fear of retribution. We can't start censoring speech just because we don't like what someone has to say.

Journalist: But hate speech can lead to real harm. It can fuel violence and discrimination. We have a responsibility to protect people from that kind of speech.

Tech Entrepreneur: I agree that we have a responsibility to protect people, but censorship is not the answer. The answer is to combat hate speech with more speech. Let people speak out against it and expose it for what it is.

Journalist: But what if that just gives a platform to even more hate? We have to draw the line somewhere.

Tech Entrepreneur: The line is clear. We should only limit speech in cases where it directly incites violence. Anything else is a slippery slope that could lead to the suppression of all kinds of legitimate speech.

Journalist: I think we're just going to have to agree to disagree on this one. But I hope you can see my perspective and understand why I feel so strongly about this issue.

Tech Entrepreneur: I do, and I respect your opinion. But I hope you can also understand why I feel so strongly about protecting free speech. It's a fundamental right that is essential to a free and open society.

12:27 PM · Dec 1, 2022

It seems to me that we have arrived at this moment in the history of humankind, that we have reached a stage in our ideological life that we only nurture from two opposite arborescent schools of thought; progressive Neoliberalism and Liberalism. The problem is not the dichotomy itself or which dichotomies they are, but it is that we are stuck in this dichotomy of choosing sides as if there is a clear line in history that one can stand on either side of. The problem is we cannot generate new thoughts and bring new arguments to the table while getting exploited by these ideological machines. Yet the arguments keep repeating in conversations either online or offline. These repetitions perceptibly reaffirm existing thoughts that restrict us from encountering other thoughts as well as forms, languages and epistemological tools that are not rooted in these particular centralized biases mentioned above. This being the case, how can we get out of these systems? How can one break the system and encounter new things? These thoughts took a specific form for me when I started to think about it as an art practice. Influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's texts and *João Fiadeiro's* Method of Real-Time Composition the question took the form of: How can the practice of *Real-Time Composition* create a hypothetical performative mode as *the body without organs* that can encounter *something* unknown?

Real-Time Composition is a method created by Portuguese choreographer *João Fiadeiro* in 1997 to deal with the linguistic conventions of dance. Although *Fiadeiro's* work is rooted in dance and choreography, he describes this method as a pre-discipline, pre-language tool, a cartography for him and his collaborators, and most importantly, a work ethic. (Fiadeiro, 2007)

I understand this work ethic not only as a code but also as a mode, as a way of thinking about how to think about the arts, or, in other words, as a meta-art practice. The self-referential aspect of Real-Time Composition dismantles the orthodox frameworks of art-making (if there are any?).

Therefore, there is a need for responsibility towards what is happening inside the frame of this method while it is being practiced, as Fiadeiro puts “I know the >body< that I work with is >the body that observes what is doing while doing it< ...”(Fiadeiro, 2007, 103)

The reason Fiadeiro uses the verb observe rather than comprehend or interpret is that sensibility and objectivity are fundamental to this method. The rules of Real-Time Composition do not let the participants to refer the events and the *things* happening in the frame to the outside of that frame whether it is a memory or a who did what in the room or the knowledge of knowing from before what is inside of a book in the frame while it is closed. Participants encounter *things* as they are happening rather than understand those as representations of other things and summon a desire from the past or a notion of the future. In an interview with Roman Bigé, Fiadeiro puts it this way: “...if we introduce ourselves to each other, we are going to miss something crucial in my work, that is to say: to preserve, to prolong the state of not-knowing. you'd think I'm being rude, but I insist ‘It's not who you are or what you do that interests me. I think it would be a shame to start our relationship by repeating the social dogma that plays out around our beings; besides, it would probably backfire against us.’ I would like the perception to be as acute and direct as possible. which requires removing masks provided by our functions: dancer, philosopher, editor.” (Fiadeiro, 2017, 4)

Here is where I see Real-Time Composition and Deleuze overlapping, in the sense that what may be encountered is distinct from what can be recalled as a form of recognition. The most significant distinction between an encounter and a recognition is that the former can only be perceived, whereas the latter can also be imagined, remembered, or conceptualized.(Deleuze, 2001)

“It therefore presupposes the exercise of the senses and the exercise of the other faculties in a common sense. The object of encounter, on the other hand, really gives rise to sensibility with regard to a given sense.”(Deleuze, 2001, 139)

Fiadeiro distinguishes what is sensing and what can be thought of as sensing and he puts this even before the principles of the method. The interpreter-improviser must be careful not to mistake sense in the sense of meaning with sense in the sense of orientation. He needs to come to terms with the fact that his function does not consist of understanding what it is that he stands for or the significance of the things that he does; rather, he is responsible for orienting himself and finding a path that stimulates and maintains the attention of the part of the self that observes the actions it performs. (Fiadeiro, 2007)

The typical experience is governed by common sense, to the extent that one may even say that common sense places restrictions on the typical experience. Within the parameters of this discussion, common sense functions as the primary constituent of representation. (O’Sullivan, 2007)

On the one hand, Real-Time Composition allows the collective to explore the unknown, to let the *thing* emerge organically As a consequence and not as a cause. As a question and not as an answer. On the other hand, it creates a space and a delay for the

participant to recognize and analyze something that happened after their encounter. This process is divided into three basic principles: the first and third have to deal with actions that are called *critical zones*, and the second is called the *dig in* phase, which supports the actions. Roughly speaking, there is an encounter with what is happening, then a recognition, and then a new encounter.(Fiadeiro 2007, 106)

This encounter with the not-so-clear *something* opens a door to achieving a certain performative mode, which is curious, aware, and adventurous if I reduce it from its somatic and psychological states to some adjectives. I think this performative mode, which is somehow indescribable for me in words, can lead us *somewhere* or to *something* in thought that we do not know what it is [yet]. It is a sight of possibilities, a body without organs.

The body without organs is a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and inspired by Antonin Artaud, the body without organs is a self-regulating machine with the full potential of its constituent parts. Since every living *thing* has some type of desire. The unrestrained embodiment of those desires is the body without organs. This body without organs is coded with the desiring machines created and emerging in the space and time of the practice of Real-Time Composition. The *something* is made from torn-apart codes from the encounters and pathing of the recognitions.

Real-Time Composition proposes a simple paradigm shift: one should suspend knowledge rather than react based on what one already knows. The best way to deal with the unknown is to welcome it with open arms (or give in to it). As a result, the linear perception of time is shattered, a hole is made in the sense of continuity, and an interval *emerges*. Inside this interval, time is *twisted* (like the topological surface of a *Möbius strip*), meaning that it is not linear (or even circular), and it is governed by laws that do not correspond to the

conventional concepts of before or after, inside or outside, up or down, or left or right. Within the context of this particular timeline, space possesses the peculiar quality of being both *no longer* and *not yet* at the same time. (Bianchi, n.d.)

Regardless of how this art practice and philosophy are weaved and connected in a rhizomatic way, I need to clarify and explain how the Real-Time Composition method works and what is the *modus operandi* here. This attempt to explain this specific art practice is a complicated one.

Firstly, this method is only a tool, the things that are created in the process are not necessarily performances or pieces of art.

Secondly, it must be practiced as a group, it cannot be done alone. Nothing that occurs in Real Time Composition is the result of the desires or interests of a single individual. If only a single agent is involved, nothing will transpire. You require several (even when we are alone). Nothing occurs unless a series of crossed events collide within a matrix of premises and principles meant to prevent a single player from hijacking the event. Until a collision occurs, nothing occurs. (Campos, n.d.)

The practice starts with a frame, whether it is a room or a taped rectangle in a studio. The idea is to separate the inside from the outside of the space. The participants would gather around (or in front or according to the frame) and observe instead of understanding what is happening in the frame as Fiadeiro puts it: “In Real Time Composition the role of the practitioner is not to understand but about to stand. There is nothing *under* the *stand*. Instead of trying to compose, to create, the only task of a real-time composer should be taken is a stand, a position, so others can *pose* with. In Portuguese, the preposition *com*

means *with* and taking a position-with instead of com-posing (arriving with a readymade *with*) is the performer's main challenge in this practice.” (Campos, n.d.)

Practitioners stand on the exterior and observe the interior while imagining/projecting possible types of occupancy. In Real Time Composition, this look is the initial *move*, and it occurs even if no one performs anything. In this practice, there is no hierarchy between those who do and those who observe, and the practitioner might engage in intensive work without ever having *made* a single motion. From this point on, the work develops in a *back-and-forth* manner between the *outside* space and the *within* space by applying the following principles and presuppositions:

When the typical order of events is suddenly thrown off, the beginning of the game will begin.

When confronted by the vacuum, the player must first do nothing before moving on to the next step. *Doing nothing* is not stopping - immobilizing, paralyzing – but noticing. This results in the activation of an active kind of suspension known as observation. The practitioner needs to make use of the momentary suspension of meaning and lack of purpose when *doing nothing* to avoid the need to ask inquiries that feed the impulse to criticize (*who?*) or comprehend (*why?*). The practitioner is required to replace these statements with (*what?*) (referring to real estate) and (*how?*) (referring to the possibilities), which are brought about by the actual event.

When the moment comes to take action, the practitioner should not base their decision on anticipation or on experiences from the past (which is always). This game always starts from wherever the player is at the moment, regardless of where that may be. Not from the location that one was in or the location that they would have wished to be in.

This is a game of silent questions, in which each move is made (and received) without any explanation or interpretation of what the action means. To accomplish this, one needs to be open and complete (rather than closed and partial) as well as explicit and consistent in their language (instead of implicit and coherent). This game may be broken down into two independent parts: finding the game, and playing the game.

Players must take at least three different positions to determine the rules of this game. This results in the formation of two different relations: one between the first and second positions, and another between the third position and the connection between the first and second positions.

- . Being in the first place allows one to observe;
- . The second position makes a suggestion based on the information that was provided in the first place and relates to that information;
- . The third position validates this route, which ultimately results in an integrated strategy.

Playing the game at this point is similar to delaying the game's conclusion, as the common plan, which establishes a common direction rather than a common meaning, has already been established by the capability of adjusting the doses of variety and repetition that are offered to the system at any one time to keep the life of this shared plan going for as long as possible.

There is no way to win or lose in this game until it is stopped due to an error or an overload of the system. In this kind of situation, the practitioner should accept the

conclusion, watch the nothingness (while simultaneously monitoring himself), and *do nothing*. (Campos, n.d.)

“In the end, the process of Real-Time Composition will have overcome the interruption of a pre-future. visible (annihilation of an expectation) which broke the line time and caused the lapse. Gradually, by a movement back and forth of proposals and confirmations (between participants), the Real-Time Composition made possible the emergence of another (new) plane. In other words, the lapse, having broken the initial common plan shared, left the participants without anything and with the task of collectively designing a new common, gleaned element [properties-possibilities] from the previous plan to transfer them to a new plan.” (Fiadeiro, 2017, 26)

The frame in Real-Time Composition can be imagined as the body without organs in Deleuze and Guattari's terms. The frame itself is a machine working with continuous coupling machines created by actions and decisions of the participants which rise from some kind of a desire or repression of a desire towards a production which is the continuity and survival of the practice. The participant or the decision maker machines, couple and brace. Then, they make errors. However, we should consider the decisions made in the frame as associative flows that must be seen as ideal things. A machine can be conceptualized as a succession of pauses or interruptions (coupures). These breakdowns should in no way be interpreted as a break from reality; rather, their operation can be viewed along a variety of axes, depending on whatever aspect of them is being investigated at any given time. Every machine starts coupled to an ongoing material flow (hylé), which it eventually disrupts when it begins to operate. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983)

“Far from being the opposite of continuity, the break or interruption conditions this continuity: it presupposes or defines what it cuts into as an ideal continuity. This is because, as we have seen, every machine is a machine of a machine. The machine produces an interruption of the flow only insofar as it is connected to another machine that supposedly produces this flow.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, 36)

Furthermore, the body without organs is a platform to record, similar to the frame in the Real-Time Composition “The body without organs, the unproductive, the non consumable, serves as a surface for the recording of the entire process of production of desire, so that desiring-machines seem to emanate from it in the apparent objective movement that establishes a relationship between the machines and the body without organs.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, 11)

Saturation of the system occurs when the frame as the body without organs reaches its limit of being and begins to reject the intolerable decisions and content that lie within itself. It is also the moment when the collective is pushing the envelope of epistemology in performance. At this juncture, the group will have reached its peak, which will be accompanied by a whirlwind of information and a deluge of codes that have been ripped apart. The inability to connect with machines, the manufacturing of those machines, and the sounds that are associated with them become unbearable for the body without organs. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983)

Throughout the whole process, the body and the mind of participants are continuously coupling and bracing with ideas and possibilities, and associating *some things* to play the game and create collectively possible and/or impossible *things*. This stimulation of the

mind and body, the long period of physical presence and the Zen-like atmosphere of the practice shifts the performative mode of the participants. They spiral in and out, with the constant question of (*what is this?*) and (*what is this now?*) regardless of any notion of artistic production, any notion of past and future that would unify them. They share common attention and tension while drawing a map of the presence and the present, not as creators but as mediators of the event. The space and time break for the participants make them vulnerable to what might happen or what they would possibly encounter without fear of failure or a failed production. As the body without organs begins to fall apart, the frame becomes delirious and transfers information between itself and the participants in a way that was not accessible and unlocked before or at the beginning of the process. The body and the presence of the participants are ready to act without necessarily doing anything and in control of space and time without claiming the authorship of a property that cannot be theirs.

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Appendix B.

Video Documentation

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