REFLECTIONS ON INTIMACY AND NARCISSISM IN ONTROEREND GOED'S PERSONAL TRILOGY

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the functioning of intimate experience in three one-on-one performances by the Belgian theatre company Ontroerend Goed, grouped together as the Personal Trilogy: *The Smile off Your Face* (2003), *Internal* (2007) and *A Game of You* (2010). It will be argued that 'the experience' is rendered a site of aesthetic engagement in these performances and that this rendering encourages the participant to reflect on the terms of intimate interaction. Some potentially productive discrepancies in these performances will be discussed in addressing the production of experience, such as belief and belief under false pretences, control and being controlled, and a desire for self-fulfilment in relation to its being undermined. These discrepancies will be theorized with reference to Ovid's myth of Narcissus and Echo and Richard Sennett's comments on narcissism in *The Fall of Public Man* (1974), where a provocative model of 'narcissistic participation' will be proposed as being relevant to this kind of work. Perhaps the deliberate undermining of intimate experience may open up space to formulate a politics of participation premised not on a balance of power between performer and participant, but, rather, on an affective revealing of its elusiveness.

KEYWORDS: one-on-one theatre; audience participation; narcissism; narcissistic participation; intimacy; Ontroerend Goed; Personal Trilogy

This article looks at how the aesthetic rendering of intimate experiences in Ontroerend Goed's Personal Trilogy might impact on how we theorize a politics of participation in one-on-one theatre. Broadly speaking, one-on-one theatre is usually designed to be experienced by individual audience members in isolation from anyone other than a performer, or performers. While the term 'one-to-one encounter' is also being used in this edition of *Performing Ethos*, I find that there tends to be an important element of confrontation between performer(s) and audience in this kind of work and that element of confrontation seems to me foregrounded in the term 'one-on-one theatre'. One-on-one theatre tends to be participatory and may invite audiences to perform tasks, or interact with something or someone. The personality of participating audiences may end up on display in one-on-one theatre as a consequence of these participatory tendencies, a feature that may well inject a feeling of unease within the participatory dynamic. This feature may be treated as something to be appeased or amplified by one-on-one theatre makers and that treatment is likely to impact on the degree of confrontation experienced by participating audiences.

Whether or not the audience's display of the personal is warped, exaggerated or hidden is for me not as interesting as the fact that a form of the personal tends, nonetheless, to be drawn out of audiences in one-on-one theatre. While this drawing out of the personal may be read as an intimate process, this article will critique the extent to which intimacy can be seen to operate in one-on-one theatre, looking specifically at how the Personal Trilogy sets about foregrounding and troubling the grounds on which intimacy might be identified as operating between performers and audience. While the

personal may well be something displayed by participants in one-on-one theatre, that very display may in fact obstruct the potential for intimacy to emerge as anything other than an intimacy bent back towards the self, as opposed to communion with someone else. It is in this sense that I put forward the notion of 'narcissistic participation' as a means of addressing what might be meant by this bending back of intimacy towards the self, repelling the possibility of communion between two subjects before it is given a chance to flourish in mutuality.

Ontroerend Goed is a Belgian theatre company who have been making theatre for a decade, but who shot to prominence in the United Kingdom in 2007 with their international touring production *The Smile Off Your Face* (2003). This was to become the first instalment of their one-on-one Personal Trilogy, accompanied later by *Internal* (2007) and *A Game of You* (2010). I participated in *The Smile off Your Face*, the first part of the Personal Trilogy, at the 2007 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. In this work, participants were blindfolded and had their wrists bound. They were wheeled in a wheelchair between various participatory encounters, ranging from a slow dance before being slammed against a wall to the click of a Polaroid camera, to lying on a bed in an exchange of personal memories, beliefs and regrets. At the end of the performance, the blindfold was removed to reveal a wall filled with Polaroids of past participants. They were then wheeled out of the space watching subsequent participants pass through the same performance production line.

For *Internal*, which I attended at the 2010 Norfolk and Norwich Festival, performers picked partners from a group of five participants and took them off to one of five booths for what was framed as a date. For some, as with the encounter on the bed

just mentioned, this involved sharing personal memories and experiences; for others, such as myself, it meant sitting in silence negotiating different levels of tactility with a female performer. After the 'date', performers and a now congregated audience reconvened as a group, where the intimacies revealed in private were made public by the performers, without forewarning. A slow dance with your 'date' concluded the piece.

The final part of the trilogy was *A Game of You*, which I saw at Battersea Arts Centre's One-on-One Festival, also in 2010. The performance involved individual participants moving through six different rooms, encountering various forms of mirroring: both literally, sitting alone or interacting with a performer in front of a mirror, and through a performer's mimicking of the participant's gestural behaviour and speech. Participants were also subject to clandestine observation from both performers and audience members further along the production line. This observation was gradually perceptible upon revelation of two-way mirrors, video and audio equipment. Participants were presented with a gift at the end of the performance: a CD titled *About You*, which was an audio recording of another audience member watching the participant in secret and voicing assumptions as to their identity, likes, and relationships under the questioning of a performer. As such, an element of the performance was documented, but this element was only disclosed to the participant, recorded, as it was, without the participant's knowing, when they took the time to play the CD at some point after the performance – in my case, several days later.

I want to suggest that the production of intimate experiences among individual participants is subject to critique in each of these instalments of the Personal Trilogy. First of all, experience is rendered a site of aesthetic engagement. This assertion may not,

at first, seem all that special. A century ago, theorists of the aesthetic such as Roger Fry and Clive Bell were putting emotion at the forefront of their theories of the aesthetic, typified in Bell's assertion that '[t]he starting point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art […]. This emotion is called the aesthetic emotion' (2003: 107). But it seems to me that the Personal Trilogy is not just eliciting aesthetic emotion as something secondary to the artwork, but aestheticizing experience itself. While there is clearly a stimulus that, in the first instance, has a foundational hand in the production of experience, the experience itself ends up being contaminated by an awareness of aesthetic space in which the experiencing body is placed and which is attended to by the experiencing subject. In this, there is an element of what Bryoni Trezise has aptly called 'sensationship', where audience members attend to the feel of feeling (2012: 208). As far as the Personal Trilogy can be said to exist as a group of related artworks, it will be argued, those artworks are nothing without an experiencing audience member who attends to personal experience. While seemingly matter of fact, this statement will nonetheless be revealed as illuminating a peculiarly narcissistic quality that seems present in the kinds of participation asked of audiences in the Personal Trilogy.

Second, experience is accompanied by several productively frustrating discrepancies between being in control and being controlled, belief and belief under false pretences, and desire for self-fulfilment in relation to its subversion. These discrepancies resonate with the predicament of Narcissus, who, by the pool of water, which held him captive, endured the torture of a desire perpetually without fulfilment. It is this perpetuation, this gap between what one invests with belief and a situation that

undermines that investment, that might encourage reflection on the productively compromised terms of participation. Ovid's myth of Narcissus and Echo will be read alongside Richard Sennett's book *The Fall of Public Man* (1974) to reveal how something positive might come of an encounter with duplicity. Perhaps the undermining of intimate experience might illuminate a potentially redeeming politics of participation.

Analytical focus will be placed on the *production* of experience: on participatory dynamics and performer–audience relationships in circumstances that are roughly reiterated for different audiences. While 'the experience', whatever it might be, will of course never be exactly the same for any two participants, the circumstances producing that experience might at least be fairly reproducible – especially in one-on-one work, where performances are repeated many times over a short time period. Although, with Peggy Phelan, we should acknowledge that unique variables emerge with each repetition, these variables may be outbalanced by a coherent scenography as well as rehearsed questions, gestures, movements and actions on the parts of both performers, and audiences from whom responses are elicited (1996: 146). Indeed, in a personal interview, the artistic director of Ontroerend Goed, Alexander Devriendt, suggests much the same:

> I think performance is completely repeatable. That's what I try to achieve. If, from the start of what you do, you try to achieve a reality on the stage, you have to set a structure that makes that reality possible. I never make a play that I think, or I never use an improvisation scene that I don't trust will be repeatable zillions of times. (2012)

The terms of participation, such as the participant's capacity to control in relation to being controlled, are also likely to be roughly reproduced. Devriendt suggests elsewhere that the structure of an Ontroerend Goed performance is not something to be improvised with: 'It's always there to make you feel safe as an actor. To know you're in something which has a direction and therefore a point' (2011: n.p.). It is such repeatable elements that we might take as a subject for analysis: those parts of a one-on-one performance that are carefully structured and goal oriented, especially if that goal is to elicit a particular kind of reaction.

With this in mind, I want to suggest three broadly defined links pertinent to the Personal Trilogy that seem to be based on fairly stable characteristics transcending the specificities of each performer-audience encounter. The first is a meta-theatrical musing on audience participation; each piece encourages its audiences to reflect on trust and what they choose to risk when participating, or how they might be put at risk. And each places the spotlight on the participant's capacity to control in relation to being controlled. An illustration of this would be the reveal towards the end of *Internal*, where one's personal confessions or interactions were shifted from what might have been assumed to be the private sphere of the one-on-one to the public sphere of a congregated public. What was set up as a space of intimacy, or at least invested as such by participants, was later revealed as a duplicitous space.

The second correlate linking these performances is an infiltration of the personal as a subject of enquiry. The second person pronoun functions like an invitation, appeal or dare in the title *A Game of You* and the titles of both *The Smile off Your Face* and *Internal* make similar demands. This gaming with the personal, one which extends Liesbeth Groot

Nibbelink's observation about the centrality of gaming in their work, seems apt in describing the trilogy as a whole (2012: 416). It suggests that there are rules: rules that audiences might not know about just yet. In short, these performances play with participatory protocol, while appealing to personal revelation, in a context of uncertainty.

The third common denominator resides in the promotion of what I call 'narcissistic participation' – a theme that the remainder of this article engages with most fully, but which is also dependent on preparing critical space before definition. The Personal Trilogy is about exploring the private sphere of expectations, desires, beliefs, memories and values. Participants end up immersed within an aesthetic and the personal, through that immersion, ends up being rendered as an aesthetic site. I mean this in the sense of participatory responses becoming integrated into the performance as a textual element and gestic language, but I also mean it as an aestheticization of experience.[1] Experience refers to the realm of affect and emotion, neatly encapsulated in the notion of sensationship, but it also refers to a behavioural aptitude, which in the current context we might term participatory protocol. For some, exposure to participatory theatre might act as a rehearsal process: it might promote exclusivity; it might privilege a certain kind of participant, particularly of an outgoing disposition; and, if the protocol is unclear, it might leave one either unsure of how to participate, or unwilling to participate, as Sophie Nield has influentially asserted (2008: 535). However, exposure to participatory theatre might just as well prompt scepticism or resilience to participatory styles of theatre, blocking the potentially productive mastery of participation implied in the notion of a behavioural aptitude. It might also prove unfavourable or unsympathetic towards the behavioural aptitudes of others. But in both these cases, experience – as a behavioural aptitude – still

remains inscribed as a benchmark, or a possibility pervaded by a sense that participatory modes can always be bettered.

This twofold meaning of experience, as sensation and as behavioural aptitude, bears down on how we might approach participation in the Personal Trilogy. Both meanings foreground the personal, either in terms of affect and emotion, or in terms of opening up, as a possibility, the utilization of previous exposure to participatory theatre. Before the personal is projected outwards through participation in Ontroerend Goed's work, through participatory actions, interactions and gestures, it is already inscribed as a fundamental part of experiencing this style of theatre. Once individual contributions, such as revelations of memory, are factored in, then the personal might even be described as its defining feature, despite the fact, or even because of the fact, that there exist fairly reproducible elements in performance: elements that might be rehearsed through developing participatory skills over time.

So why should we think of this kind of work in terms of narcissistic participation and what does this term mean? In Ovid's account of the myth of Narcissus and Echo, we read of a proud youth who shunned all who sought his love, including the nymph Echo, who was condemned to voice only what could be doubled from the words of others. Narcissus exclaims that he would die before yielding to Echo, so she flees to a cave, where her body withers and her bones turn to stone, leaving only her echoing voice. Many others sought his love and failed, before Nemesis places a curse on Narcissus: that he may love, but never win his love. Kneeling by a pool, he falls in love with the unattainable image of his own reflection, engrossed by a desire perpetually without fulfilment, culminating, inevitably, in his death (Ovid 1986: 61–66).

It is worth highlighting, with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the centrality of Echo to the myth (1993). Both Narcissus and Echo end up seeking something unattainable. For Narcissus, it is the communion of self with othered self; for Echo, it is the love of Narcissus. In trying to win his love, she is limited by what Narcissus voices. As Mollie Painter-Morland observes, 'Echo can be figured as the subject who comes into existence only in relation to others, and who "finds" herself being totally spoken by others – and, as such, spoken for' (2011: 145). Perhaps something similar is at work in the Personal Trilogy. In *The Smile off Your Face*, there is a comparable binding of one's capacities with the tying of wrists and application of a blindfold. But, strangely, it is only when the blindfold is removed that one appreciates the extent to which one's gesticulations and articulations are echoed in the responses of the other participants. Perhaps this is what Groot Nibbelink means when she speaks of that performance in terms of becoming other, 'to start an inquiry into the value and meaning of intimacy' (2012: 414). Of course, this echoing is not verbatim, but the manipulations, which the participant has passed through, are rendered strikingly apparent. And the accompanying affective responses – of startle, for instance, when slammed against that wall – find visible counterparts in the responses of other participants.

Figure 1: Alexander Devriendt in *The Smile off Your Face*. Image by Virginie Schreyen, 2005.

While audiences may desire a uniquely tailored and personal experience, it becomes apparent that, in the Personal Trilogy and work like it, such uniqueness works

within a fairly regimented and impersonal framework. In fact, intimacy can be seen as something that is treated economically in these performances, as a bargaining chip exchanged by audiences for a memorable experience, especially regarding what participants choose to invest in that experience. Commenting on the co-optation of affect and intimacy in capitalist economies, Eva Illouz suggests that 'intimate relationships increasingly put at their center a political and economic model of bargaining and exchange' (2007: 37). In part, this assertion builds on a discourse concerned with how contemporary service economies mobilize affect and emotion towards profitable ends, a discourse that has been profoundly influenced by Arlie Hochschild, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Hochschild 1983; Hardt and Negri 2000). In the Personal Trilogy, the fairly repeatable performance production lines through which different audience members pass elicit experience from them, understood in the first sense of the term noted above, as affective or emotional experience, while at the same time focusing attention on the product of that elicitation through sensationship. As such, the economization of experience in the Personal Trilogy is pulled into participatory dynamics as a potential subject of aesthetic enquiry for participating audiences. This subject of aesthetic enquiry emerges from a fairly repeatable framework that serves to nullify the likelihood of a balanced intimate exchange between performers and audience. But, at the same time, participants are encouraged to treat that nullified likelihood as a subject of critique. Drawing on Illouz, the Personal Trilogy can be seen to put at its centre a political and economic model of bargaining and exchange that is premised on the personal and what participants choose to reveal of themselves, or how they choose to act and interact. However, this centralization of intimacy, in turn, problematizes the willingness of

audiences to engage in self-revelation. This is especially apparent in *Internal*, where the audience's intimate revelations are later revealed, without forewarning, to a congregated public of performers and other audience members. This revelation is not an outlet for emotional cleansing, but an anti-therapeutic, confrontational challenge to emotional communication. Moreover, that challenge functions within a system of economic exchange, of intimate bargaining, thus circulating a depersonalized aspect of the personal that nonetheless retains a potentially strong affective link to the participant, typified in the thought or exclamation: 'How dare you!'

The participant in the Personal Trilogy, like Echo, is a figure 'who comes into existence only in relation to others, and who "finds" herself being totally spoken by others – and, as such, spoken for', to recall Painter-Morland. In *Internal*, this being 'spoken for' is literalized in the concluding congregation of a public. And what it is that is being spoken for is an aspect or aspects of the personal that were revealed in private to a stranger, who is also a performer, in a context where such revelations incessantly emerge through the confessions of subsequent audiences in what is essentially the same context over the course of an evening as other groups file in and over the course of a run. I am not suggesting that experience is reproducible; what is being suggested here is that the trigger for experience production – a theatre event that is presented to participating audiences – is necessarily pre-personal, at least in the case of the Personal Trilogy. It is a performance that is designed without an awareness of a given individual, which only subsequently takes that individual under its wing for a limited period of time. Those participating in the Personal Trilogy pass through performance and while experience itself is uniquely tied to the experiencing subject, the theatrical machine through which

they pass remains both stable and productive of comparable experiences for an indefinite number of cultural consumers. At the same time, that stability encourages us to reflect on the ease with which aspects of the personal are revealed to others in a context where the participant's revelations are othered, voiced or studied by others, in a context that nonetheless preserves a meaningful and potentially offensive affective attachment.

Echo is not the only figure in Ovid's myth that might help with theorizing the participatory dynamics at stake in the Personal Trilogy. As far as mythology goes, Narcissus is something of a celebrity. As such, it proves useful to briefly dwell on how his part in the myth of Narcissus and Echo has been discursively appropriated, if only to arrive at a better understanding of what Narcissus has come to represent through the notion of narcissism.

Uses of the Narcissus myth in critical theory did not originate in Sigmund Freud's 'On narcissism', but certainly became more numerous following publication of that work.[2] Freud describes narcissism in terms applicable to most individuals, although it has its pathological form as well. Narcissists, for Freud, seek themselves as a love object, instead of their mother (2006: 373). In clinical terms, narcissists tend to be theorized in opposition to the communal or inter-subjective domain, although recent research in the field suggests exceptions to this rule.[3] They are defined as individuals driven by self-motives, such as esteem, entitlement or power (Gebauer et al. 2012: 854). These motives are typically manifested either in grandiosity or vulnerability, depending on the kind of narcissism in question (Houlcroft et al. 2012: 274). In short, the clinical reading of narcissism looks at how individuals obsessively seek out or apply personal relevance to

things and people encountered in the world. Quite how Narcissus would have felt about this is another matter.

Psychoanalytic literature on narcissism provides an insightful introduction for a definition of 'narcissistic participation', but I choose to employ a socio-psychological approach in preparing context-specific theoretical ground. In *The Fall of Public Man*, Sennett considers how displays of the personal have, in modern social life, come to prescribe behaviours in politically compromised ways. 'Intimacy is a tyranny in ordinary life', he writes (1974: 338), that arouses a belief 'in one standard of truth to measure the complexities of social realities'. An important subject of Sennett's enquiry (1974: 263) is the suggested triumph of 'right' feeling over efficacious action in the lead-up to the mid- to late-twentieth century. Sennett (1974: 326) suggests that a result of this has been a degradation of a social subject's expressive powers, particularly playful expressivity, as the self becomes increasingly subject to its own surveillance, where reality matters 'only when it in some way promises to mirror intimate needs'. In such a society, political feeling takes precedence over political action. And the consequence: a seduction 'from converting our understanding of the realities of power into guides for our own political behaviour. The result is that the forces of domination or inequality remain unchallenged' (Sennett 1974: 339). This is what Sennett means when describing intimacy's tyranny: '[w]hen all matters are referred to a common, sovereign principle', namely, the principle of intimacy (1974: 337).

Sennett uses the trope of narcissism to theorize the promise of intimate needs being fulfilled in such a society, or, to be more precise, of intimate needs not being fulfilled, despite the promise. For Sennett (1974: 9), narcissism usually manifests in a

desire to 'feel more', particularly in relation to the pursuit of what are thought of as 'authentic' relations with others. As with Narcissus, though, this pursuit is eternally thwarted. For Sennett (1974: 220), narcissism refers to a need to legitimize the self in a sociocultural context[4]; it is not a cultural condition, but is instead a possibility of character that may be encouraged and nuanced by cultural developments, a possibility defined by 'radical subjectivity' and an obsessive projection outwards of one's personality into a degenerating public domain (1974: 22; cf. 220–21). Significantly, for Sennett (1974: 326) it is narcissism that negatively affects the subject's potential to play with reality and it is narcissism that instates the hoped-for promise of intimate needs being mirrored. One might also draw from this a reluctance to damage the self as a consequence of altering an experience of the world that is taken to be synonymous with it.

It is in this theoretical context that I wish to ground my notion of 'narcissistic participation' in Ontroerend Goed's Personal Trilogy. Drawing on Sennett, I define this as a desire for intimacy in audience participation, premised on self-projection, which can never be fully achieved. In *A Game of You*, participants encounter mirroring in a number of different guises. First of all, they wait in a small room staring at their reflection in a mirror. From the outset, the participant is confronted with their double status as both audience and performer, subject and object. Rachel Zerihan, Helen Iball and Dee Heddon, both independently and in a co-authored paper for *Contemporary Theatre Review*, have rightly framed participation in one-on-one work as arising from the possible desires for confession, escape and intimacy (Heddon et al. 2012; see also Heddon and Howells 2011; Zerihan 2006). This first mirror-room appears to confront these kinds of

desire; to be more specific, it encourages participants to confront these kinds of desire. The desire for intimacy is put on display once an isolated participant is faced with his or her own, lonely reflection. The audience, for the brief period of time that they are alone, are encouraged to question why it is that they are there, or why they want to be there. They are also encouraged to face themselves as both performer and spectator. In my own experience, I felt a strong urge to do something. There was a jug of water and a glass in front of me, and so, while not thirsty, it seemed a good idea to have a drink anyway. Even though I was merely faced with something as familiar as my own reflection, this was enough to encourage a heightening of a displayed persona. But why this compulsion to do something? Why the need for heightening the display of a persona? These responses seem to me, in hindsight, to be typically narcissistic, in Sennett's sense. In the absence of an intimate need being fulfilled through intimate interaction and exchange – in the absence of an intimate encounter with another person – it was as though I was standing in for this other, performing for myself something, anything, to activate my reflection in the mirror. Upon reflection, it seems as though an urge to maximize Experience, a memorable, fulfilling, but ultimately unattainable, idealized experience, compelled expressiveness. But only because the action performed stood in as a surrogate for another person: that is, as a surrogate for that which holds the promise of intimate needs being fulfilled.

There is another, more disturbing element to this moment of isolation in *A Game of You*. Later in the piece the mirror was revealed to be a two-way mirror. As it turns out, the participant was not alone at all, but was being watched by an unseen observer at a point further on in the performance – a role that the watched will soon adopt as their own.

In doing so, in adopting the role of unwatched watcher, the participant may feel a twinge of embarrassment, betrayal, perhaps, or even frustration. Did I pick my nose? Oh, god! I did not do anything *too* bad, did I? Despite these reservations, perhaps the dawning of a desiring moment at this earlier stage of the performance will be revealed for what it is: a space of absent intimacy, waiting to be fulfilled. On being forced to recall one's behaviour in the anticipated moment of waiting for an absent other – a reason, a motive, perhaps, for being there in the first place – the act of anticipation is revealed as something quite ridiculous. Not only that, but this very desire is potentially rendered as something disturbing, in the sense of interfering with an otherwise absent recognition of co-opting another, whomsoever it may be that finally joins the participant in that lonesome room.

Figure 2: Isolated audience member in *A Game of You*. Image by Elies Van Renterghem, 2010.

The subsequent rooms through which the participant is guided in *A Game of You* all pick up, in various ways, on the notion of mirroring – whether it's a performer playing the participant, based on clandestine observation at an earlier part of the performance, or another participant providing an audio-'mirror' once the *About You* CD mentioned earlier is handed over. What such iterations represent and seek to undermine, I believe, is self-projection and self-interest. In other words, what can be seen to be critiqued in this work is narcissistic participation. An obsessive projection outwards of the participant's personality, as Sennett would have it, is in many ways demanded of audiences in this performance: but it might also be revealed as a state that pre-exists the participant entering the space, by virtue of buying a ticket for a one-on-one performance in the first

place. This surely gets to the heart of the issue: why buy a ticket for a performance to be experienced in isolation from other audience members? Whatever reason may lie behind the impulse to buy a ticket, provided the prospective participant is aware of what a one-on-one performance is, they are also highly likely to be aware of the demands on the personal that such a performance is likely to make.

What this commentary draws into play is a need to question the relationship between the private and the public with regard to the personal and intimacy. The distinctions made between the public and private domains in Sennett's writing have come under critical scrutiny and this ought to prompt a brief aside given the centrality of *The Fall of Public Man* (1974) to my model of narcissistic participation. Lauren Berlant, for instance, insists that intimacy refers to something greater and more diverse than 'an ideal of publicness' that 'takes place within the purview of institutions […]. It can be portable, unattached to a concrete space: a drive that creates spaces around it through practices' (1998: 284; see also Linke 2011: 15–16). This may be so, but in an institution such as the theatre ideals of publicness are nonetheless foregrounded in the very notion of groups of strangers, both performers and audiences, coming together to either make or experience an art practice. Where better than the theatre to address what this ideal of publicness might mean, not least if its portability and its being unattached to a concrete space, as Berlant would have it, is to be brought into question?

Sennett usefully discusses the problem of an 'audience' in terms of arousing 'belief in one's appearance among a milieu of strangers' (Sennett 1974: 38). *Internal* deals with the possible desire of audiences to believe in the representation of a self as presented by a performer, alongside a critique of intimacy as an idealized goal in

performance exchange: a belief and idealization that is subverted once the charade collapses in public upon the performer's revelation of whatever intimacies came to pass (cf. Sennett 1974: 259–61). Sennett (1974: 38–39) goes on to describe this arousal of belief in one's appearance against 'a common code of believability', a code that we might also associate with Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). In *Internal*, this code is the subject of critique, for the code finds its counterpart in the formation of a representative system that is not wholly disclosed at the beginning of the performance. As theatre critic Andrew Haydon writes of *Internal*, '[i]t felt like there was a certain spirit of the thing we were required to enter into which had never been explained to us' (2009: n.p.). While the participant may well invest belief in what is first presented to them, alongside an idealization of intimacy, their disposition to invest belief and idealize intimacy ends up the subject of critique once the 'code of believability' unravels.

This suggestion resonates with Duška Radosavljević's commentary on *Internal*:

> In an attempt to keep hold of our critical faculties and stay on duty, we tend to perhaps overemphasize the fact that this is a construct, an illusion, a piece of theatre which, despite seeming as though it features a great deal of 'reality', cannot ultimately be trusted. (2010: 249)

It is this capacity for theatre to highlight points of disjuncture between belief and the undermining of belief that might have led Sennett to suggest that in the world of illusion, we may end up encountering a kind of certainty (1974: 176).

In conclusion, it is worth returning again to Sennett: 'the more people conceive of the political realm as the opportunity for revealing themselves to each other through the sharing of a common, collective personality, the more are they diverted from using their fraternity to change social conditions' (1974: 260–61). On first experiencing *Internal*, I felt that participants were somehow betrayed by the performance: that they, as in so much of Ontroerend Goed's work, were duped and manipulated. But surely our capacity to recognize this reveals something about a desire for something different? Might it be that that 'something different' – let's call it authentic feeling and intimacy – might in fact squander the inter-subjectivity it would appear to stand for: grasping, like Narcissus, at a desire which can never be fulfilled? There is something narcissistic, in Sennett's sense, about the desire for intimacy with strangers in the context of one-on-one performance: a context which offers individuals 'Experience', in the twofold sense of the term. So perhaps the disjunctures evident in Ontroerend Goed's Personal Trilogy – between reality and fiction, desire and our capacity to fulfil it, control and being controlled, knowledge of protocol and its being undermined – are in fact the playing spaces of a politics of participation: one that rests on the crux between intimacy and its subversion.

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Notes

[1] Groot Nibbelink makes a comparable, but slightly different point: 'Compared to conventional performance, the theatre of experience uses the spectator's system of perception as its primary channel of communication, instead of the performance on stage serving as a mediator between ideas of the artist and the audience's perception' (2012: 416).

[2] Freud writes:

> 'Narcissism" originated as a term of clinical description, having been chosen by Paul Näcke in 1899 to define that form of behaviour whereby an individual treats his own body in the same way in which he might treat that of any other sexual object, by looking at it, stroking it and caressing it with sexual pleasure until by these acts he achieves full gratification. (2006: 358)

[3] In an article titled 'Communal narcissism', Jochen E. Gebauer et al. describe a form of narcissism that is not based on independent attempts to satisfy self-motives; rather, they look at how 'communal narcissism', which they see as being independent from the 'agentic narcissism' just alluded to, has arisen as an independently identifiable form of narcissism premised on attempts to satisfy a grandiose self-image through communal means (Gebauer et al. 2012: 855).

4 This might best be read in contrast to contemporary sociological perspectives on individualism and narcissism that advocate 'personal communities' as a potentially legitimate and successful means of integrating the historically opposing notions of 'individualism' and 'community' (Wilkinson 2010).