

THREE ESSAYS ON PERFORMANCE

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Lights up

3. I am asking my body to behave like it is motivated by a mind different than my own. There must be some madness in that. It's a dislodging, of course. I am, by definition, out of my mind when I do it.

2. Make no mistake, acting is a craft with the attention and precision of any visual art. It is often believed that the actor is simply the vehicle of text, that they are subject to the alchemy of script and human instinct – that performance is not made, it simply happens. Be warned: this essay will not forgive you of this thinking. Aristotle proclaimed confidently that the essence of drama is not found in its performance, but in its text: it reveals its power by mere reading. The supremacy of text ends here – the performer is no mere reader. Here, we value the body and we weigh our performers as craftsmen. We dismiss the notion of actors as subsidiaries of text, as simply vessels.

3. On stage I am saying *look at me, look at me, I'm not here. Look at me, please. Look through me.*

2. Of course the method of a craft is not always consistent with its application. The theories of acting are not always represented by actors.

1. And as a child I studied my mother, learnt to stir my coffee like she did, stood like her and held my clasped hands to my chest, like her. If my body was ever neutral I do not know, I can't remember motion before mimicry.

2. The fact is that acting is not the consequence of text, but the consequence of body. Actors are not the ambassadors of their text but of their audience, of the way they move. And the second fact is that our bodies are subject to the time we live in; the habits of motion are defined by the conventions we live under. We are the result of our clothes, our shoes, of the climate, of sexual preference, of gender. And the actor testifies to this, in pursuit of naturalism and credibility.

3. And at 17 years old in a rehearsal room, my director tells me to get my hands out of my pockets. *An uninspiring image*, I am told. I say it's a character choice. Said with a laugh, but the spine of sincerity and pragmatism we love in this business: *being dull isn't a character choice. Try and be interesting to watch*. And in the moment I simply cannot think of how else to use my hands, so for weeks I study others' range of motion, to pilfer them for my performance.

1. So I'll always feel like a child at the dinner table, trying to keep up with conversation and perform correct behaviour, learning how to use my cutlery well, to laugh at the right moment, to seem interested, to make eye contact but avoid staring.

3. It takes less effort than you might imagine, to begin conceiving of my body as a narrative tool. I am a girl, 17 years old — of course I am already a master of self-objectification, have trained my mental camera to study my every pose. And of course this practice has been taught to me by images, the cliché of magazines and billboards, so of course the mental self-portrait is stationary too, sells the reflection of myself like an advertisement. Now: the body is in motion, speaks like a film, moves

like a play; now: I am a thing of three dimensions, moving through time and offering cinematic satisfaction in each action. Look at me, look at me, I say, just by moving.

1&3. The truth is that I have learnt to act the same way I have learnt to be a person: by imitation.

2. Though I don't deny it takes a cognitive shift to understand acting as a craft; to know it is a form that evolves in equal parts as response to the culture it reflects and the craft itself. It is awry, at times, to know that actors learn to imitate bodies both by studying them in their natural daily motions, and by watching other actors. It takes a shift, I grant you, yes, to know that we can best understand this form by reverse engineering it. There are performances that are landmarks, and in this pursuit I am asking you to join me on, we do best to focus on these performances.

3. And with question of hands, of course at 17 years old I am thinking of Gena Rowlands, though I do not know it yet.

2. *Woman Under the Influence* (1974) by John Cassavetes, which I watch at 25 years old, but of course I have simply always known it, just as Gena Rowlands' performance has always been a part of me, though I did not know it yet.

3. 17 years old, my character choice: she nervously clenches her fists, punctuates speech with a slightly extended thumb and holds her left elbow in moments of stillness.

1. One day my mother spotted me performing a gesture I'd stolen from her and snapped at me that I will have to become my own person at some point.

3. I know the body is vehicle for story and gesture is punctuation. Indeed, if the body is story, then the jut of my elbows might be plot, my lean analepsis, my wrists catharsis.

1&2&3. The question of body language: if you can read a body then surely you can write a body too.

Lights down.

Lights up.