

Is Dalibor Martinis's "Performing Installation" Theatre?¹

Jerzy Limon

In 1992 Dalibor Martinis exhibited a video installation entitled *Supper at Last*, first shown in the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto). It is a work that employs traditions and conventions belonging to various artistic systems of signification and media, including video art, scenography, and even radio drama. As many of its components can be classified as theatrical, one is justified in asking whether the entire work/event meets the criteria of what might be called theatre, which I would like to see as a separate discipline of art governed by specific modeling rules (and not as a metaphorical term denoting forms of social behavior or other artistic forms). The author himself describes his work as a 'performing installation'², dealing with 'geometry of time'. Still, that is not enough. In my opinion, although today we have an overflow of "theatres", from Orlan's operation theatre, through the theatre of the body, the theatre of orgy and mystery, to menstruation theatre, it is not the artist's conviction or whim that decides what is and what is not theatre, but the systemic distinctive rules, of which, it seems to me, most important are the

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² E-mail from Dalibor Martinis, dated 15/11/2007. A brief description of the work may be found in a book by Nada Beroš, *Dalibor Martinis. Public Secrets* (Zagreb: omni:media, 2006), p. 101.

temporal structures employed³. In my opinion, theatre is not "arbitrary relations" conventionally deployed, but a medium governed by a set of verifiable rules (like music). Human language is not a set of arbitrary relations of sounds, but is governed by a set of rules called grammar. Theatre is governed by its own particular and distinctive grammar. Naturally, we may have situations, also artistic actions, that imitate theatre, or want to be perceived as theatre, or use elements of theatricality, but in fact are not theatre. In the same way glossolalia is not language, although it may sound like one⁴.

An attempt to define theatre might be seen as provocative and problematic in itself⁵, but I think we should look at this not as an attempt to demarcate strictly a form of human behavior, but as a step towards defining the rules that govern that behavior, just as grammar governs the specific selection, combination and articulation of sounds we call

³ I am aware that the 'systemic rules' and other criteria I use in this essay will not necessarily be accepted by all those who advocate a more 'abolitionist' approach to art. I take a more conservative view, seeing theatre art as an act of communication (or event) that employs intrinsic rules that may be distinguished from the rules that govern social behavior or other forms of human communication and interaction.

⁴ Michel de Certeau, "Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias", *Representations* (Fall 1996), No. 56, pp. 29–47.

⁵ A question may be raised, why at all do we need to define theatre? Well, as I see it, we are interested in identifying the medium, because depending on its nature, we adjust our reading or perception, hence interpretation, to the rules generating meaning. In theatre, we do not watch humans interacting, but actors at work, who can only be signs of humans interacting. In theatre, we do not watch humans engaged in dialogues, verbal exchanges, but actors at work, whose utterances and behavior can only be signs of humans communicating. The language the actors used is not the language used by fictional figures. As a matter of fact, it does not have to be a sign of any linguistic activity in the fictional realm, but of a state of mind or emotions. If we are not able to distinguish between humans interacting and actors impersonating humans interacting, we shall put ourselves in the position of naïve spectators or, rather, witnesses of an event that we treat at face value, and, hence, the event witnessed is not capable of generating meanings that go beyond the literal or free connotations. Of course, much of today's theatre imitates life and life-like utterances and behavior, but we must not be misled: this is just another convention, which may be analytically distinguished and described. Naturally, the case is different in performance art, which is not theatre (but may contain a large dose of theatricality).

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language. This is a serious theoretical and methodological problem, and there is no way in which it can be dealt with in a short essay; however, the rudimentary assumption here is that the proposed rules that govern theatre should be verifiable by theatre practice⁶. Similarly, I expect that the objections that this premise might raise will also be verified by theatre practice, and not only by the opponent's ideological stand. Secondly, I would like to treat theatre as an artistic medium, not as an allegorical term with which we describe various human activities and/or social occasions. If we describe the world in cinematic terms, it does not mean that films become life, or vice versa. What it means is that we employ a rhetorical device, namely, an allegory to describe the world. And this is what has happened with the term "theatre": it has become a general allegory to describe various activities of humans and of their creations. Of course, when I talk of theatre as an artistic medium this brings about the question of what "artistic" means, and thus we enter into the mine-field of aesthetics etc. For me (partly following Roman Jakobson), "aesthetic" simply means a form of human communication, in which part of the message is oriented towards itself. In other words, the text/event at least partly talks about itself, about the rules that enabled its composition and appearance in the form and substance given (theatre is not only site-specific, but it is also substance-specific). An artistic text (object, whatever) justifies its appearance in the space, time and substance given; non-artistic texts do not reveal that feature. The recognition of the rules is important, because it enables us to grasp the theatre's ability to accumulate and condense meanings in the ways that non-theatrical texts cannot (artistic texts have the capacity to say more with the use of less material). A sonnet remains a sonnet, whether or not

⁶ Theatre theory has the ambition of being scholarship or science, if you will, and not just a set of arbitrary opinions. The intention is not "jailing" the theatre, but, on the contrary, liberating it from misunderstandings and confusion caused by ideological disputes and controversies. It attempts to base the discussion of theatre on solid assumptions, verified by logic and reason, findings of other disciplines and, perhaps above all, by practice, that would equip us with analytical tools, which would make our analyses verifiable and the discussion sound. Of the recent works dealing with theatre theory, see, for instance, Eli Rozik, *Generating Theatre Meaning. A Theory of Methodology of Performance Analysis* (Brighton, Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2008). See also works by Marvin Carlson, Erika Fichter-Lichte or Patrice Pavis.

one likes its meaning: the words are selected and combined in such a way that the text always presents itself to a reader: "I'm a sonnet"⁷.

Theatre is perhaps the only art discipline that is an event or an act of communication where live performers create fictional time, or – to be more precise – the fictional present, which, though it reveals itself in parallel to the real present and overlaps with it, belongs to another, fictional time stream (of course other artistic disciplines, such as performance art or happening, can incorporate theatrical elements, but this usually does not make them theatre)⁸. It is a stream of time past, which is returned to the present by means of convention and the rules of theatre art⁹. It is past time transferred to the present, resulting in the

⁷ Critics will inevitably say, "So what?" I will provide an example from *Romeo and Juliet* to explain why it is important and significant. In the play, Romeo's and Juliet's first dialogue takes a form of a sonnet, and its meanings are determined by the situational context, both verbal and non-verbal. The young lovers do not know how to talk naturally about love, they do not know how to express their true feelings, and their shyness is reflected in their bookish use of the most conventional and therefore "artificial" mode of expression of that period, which takes the form of a sonnet reflecting the chemistry between them. The "form" is the meaning, and there is no way in which we can separate the two. Please note that Shakespeare's use of the sonnet form in this particular scene conveys meanings that would be absent if any other form of dialogue was used. And the final "shape" of the dialogue cannot be translated into any other without a significant loss or distortion (impoverishment) of the meaning. In non-artistic texts, the "form" is usually irrelevant, because it does not convey a significant amount of meaning.

⁸ To prevent misunderstandings, let me point out that the first person narration does not occur in real presence (the act of reading does), but can only imitate the presence of the speaker. Literary fiction is always set in the past (as all narratives), and does not reveal the theatre's ability to appear as the evolving present time (the present time of perception is something else altogether). A portrait in painting is a recorded image of the past, so is the film, the confessional poem etc. The folk-song (any song) or a rock concert is not theatre, unless the performer pretends to be at a different time and somewhere else, and pretends that he/she does not notice the presence of the listeners. Theatre wants to be perceived as the real present time evolving in the presence of at least one spectator.

⁹ I have extensively written on the subject of time in theatre in my book, published in Polish, *Pięty wymiar teatru* ["Theatre's Fifth Dimension"] (Gdansk: Slowo/obraz terytoria, 2005). Of my recent works published in English and

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appearance and the blending of two present times, the real time of the performance and spectators, and the fictional present time of the stage figures, with a concomitant appearance of their seemingly shared future¹⁰.

To achieve the illusion of reality, of temporal oneness, a fictional present time is created by means of a fictional future as if materializing in the objective present time of the performance and in the *hic et nunc* of the spectators. Paradoxically, this happens even if the fictional future belongs to the time long passed. In other words, if in our lives and experience we perceive the present as the moment, in which the immaterial future “comes into being” and materializes through all sorts of events and “acts” in the world around us, there is no doubt that this phenomenon allows us to treat the latter as our reality, which we may perceive with our senses. It is the events occurring around us, and our consciousness of perceiving them, that contribute to our sense of a temporal continuum and the present. Since in the theatre, we are dealing with two distinct streams of time, we may also distinguish a fictional future that, as indicated, materializes through various acts or events occurring on the stage. Since that phenomenon occurs in the present moment of the time stream the spectators live in, and in the present moment of the performance as a phenomenal event, belonging as such to our reality, there is an obvious overlap, resulting in the effect of simultaneity of the two time streams and the effect of oneness of the two present moments. Consequently, the future of the fictional figures materializes on the stage within the temporal continuum and the materializing future of an event, constituting the spectators’ present and future, i.e. the performance itself.

dealing with similar issues, see “The Fifth Wall: Words of Silence in Shakespeare’s Soliloquies and Asides,” *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* (144/2008), pp. 47-65 and “Theatre’s Fifth Dimension: Time and Fictionality”, *Poetica* 41/1-2 (2009), pp. 33-54..

¹⁰ Naturally, the very concept of “future” is a complex philosophical, psychological and scientific issue, which cannot be dealt with sufficient attention in a relatively short essay. I am therefore using the word in its everyday meaning, as a sort of projection of probability, partly resulting from the belief in the continuity of time and the metaphoric cognitive interpretation of future as being spatially “in front” of us, “ahead”. To some extent the future seems to be generated by the present, as the consequence of human intervention into the world, on the other, paradoxically, the present seems to result from the future, as if it were given and predetermined.

Thus theatre is the only artistic form, in which the fictional future and the “real” future merge into one in the actions and utterances of the actors and the remaining components of the performance. Thus, it is not only the past that is conventionally brought into our present, but also the fictional future that seems to be the constituting part of that present. In other words, the theatrical present reveals a paradoxical feature of having two distinct determinants: the fictional future belonging to the denoted realm, and the real future of the phenomenal performance.

What we are thus dealing with is a paradoxical situation where past events, utterances, and actions are revealed as if they were the real present of the performer¹¹ and the spectator. This makes it possible to create a situation where theatre ‘unfolds’ (reveals) itself to the recipient in a manner not unlike empirical reality. This happens because the performer – a real human being living (also biologically) in the real time shared with the spectator – signals that something that has happened (or, less frequently, will happen) within a different time and usually within a different space, is his or her actual reality. To achieve this effect, the performers cease to notice both the theatrical situation (i.e., real space) and the audience’s presence, and through this they signal finding themselves in a new situation that is indexical with what is taking place within the denoted fictional space¹². In other words, they pretend that

¹¹ The initial distinction between an actor and a stage figure has to be made: the former is a human being for whom theatre is a profession or hobby, whereas the latter is a creation of the former. In other words, the actor is both the co-creator and the material substance of the sign of a figure that is immaterial and basically a mental construct. It has to be added at this point that the new wave of the so-called postdramatic theatre often attempts to break down the barrier dividing the actor and the figure; consequently, the temporal and spatial split or hiatus is annulled. This may, of course, be a temporary feature of a production, but in its dominating variety it undermines the basic qualities of theatre as art, which inevitably thus becomes another type of art, such as performance art or happening. Cf. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London / New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹² Indexical relations are based on spatial and temporal contiguity, and/or on the cause and effect sequence of events. The term itself derives from the seminal work of Charles S. Peirce, who differentiates three types of sign: icons, indexes and symbols. The icon is a sign that refers to the object denoted by means of characteristics with which it is itself endowed (similarities), regardless of whether the given object really exists or not. An icon may possess these characteristics in

they are somewhere else at a different time. In fact, this relationship is not real but conventional. A real relationship, in turn, emerges between the live performer and what materially exists on the stage, which, in turn, is inaccessible to the fictional figures. All of this results in the creation of two models of perceiving reality, the figures' (as signaled by the actors) and the audience's; the juxtaposition of the two is a meaning-generating factor in theatre, and may be treated as theatre's distinctive feature¹³. Thus, in theatre we need at least two streams of time (which merge in the present moment only), at least two different modes of perceiving reality (of which one is signaled by the figures through the utterances and actions of the actors), and at least one spectator capable of blending the two input spaces (the real and the fictional). What follows is that in theatre fiction or illusion is not the goal in itself, but what counts is the relationship between the denoted fiction and the substance and modeling of the signifier, blended in the receptive mind of the spectator. Without the latter, there is no one who could perform the act of blending. Thus,

itself, or they may be bestowed on it in a given artistic utterance (we speak then of attributed similarity – a phenomenon typical of the theatre). In the case of the index we have above all – if similarity is lacking – a relation of contiguity between the material of the sign and its meaning (dark rings under the eyes indicate a sleepless night or tears, or – by a surprise – a special cosmetic “mask”). This type of sign appears most frequently in the theatre in a relation based on ostension or – which in the case of acting is the most important feature – on signalling a cause-effect relation that results directly from spatial contiguity (as in the given example of dark rings under the eyes). The symbol, in contrast, creates meanings of a connotative nature; it has only the value attributed to it (e.g. by cultural codes, religion or mythology), so neither similarity nor contiguity is expected of it. Symbolically dark rings may signify an evil character or drug addiction. We should recall here that according to Peirce the ideal sign has a complex character and all types appear in it at the same time, though in varying proportions.

¹³ We may therefore see theatre as the art of creating dual present time, where the real and the fictional overlap. Even though in present day practice, especially in the so-called postdramatic theatre, the border between theatre and life seems to be blurred, we must not forget that in theatre we are dealing with temporal and spatial boundaries that are not life-like. Every performance has a beginning and an end, and within these limits everything enters into closer or more distant relationships, which means that meaning is generated in ways totally different than in real life. Thus, the seeming similarity of art and life on the stage is just a convention, often employed in the past (e.g. in Renaissance and Baroque court performances).

we must not forget that theatre is substance-specific and recipient-specific.

The indexical relationship means that when the performers (actors) change their so-called deictic system, they signal spatial, temporal and causal contiguity with reality, which is not actually there on the stage, being only invoked semiotically by signs made up of properly chosen and modeled signaling matter (that is, all that is materially present in the space of semiosis). Also, the actors signal their temporal contiguity with the fictional past and the fictional future. At the same time the actor – a live human being, who is the most important theatrical sign – remains in various relationships with what surrounds him or her materially. It is predominantly owing to the actor that the entire signaling matter of the work (costumes, stage set, lights, music, words, sounds, etc.) enters into indexical relationships with the fictional world. It is the actor who is the mediator drawing everything he or she looks at, refers to or touches into a relationship with what is not there, that is fiction. He/She also has the ability to signal the conventional spatial and temporal transfer of everything that surrounds him into the fictional realm. This creates a duality in all respects that is so typical of theatre, which is acceptable only on the basis of the agreement between the performer and the recipient. The duality rests on what seems to be split ontology: live human bodies and real objects and other phenomena actually present on the stage reveal the ability to become signs, at least partly, of what is not there, of the fictional, hence immaterial, world. The actors signal to us, being the spectators, the way in which fictional figures read the world around them, and that is juxtaposed by what the spectator sees and hears on the stage. As I said, this is a meaning-generating process, unique for theatre as a medium¹⁴.

¹⁴ This is why a battle reconstruction (usually) is not theatre, because it creates meaning in a way that is totally different from the rules of the medium. Among other things, it is substantially (materially) entirely self-referential, or wants to be read as a sort of replica of uniforms, weapons, actions etc. A reconstruction is a historical show, it is an enactment, which does not intend to mean anything else apart from what may be seen or heard, set in the past. This is because the performers' implied perception of the visible world is the same (ontologically and materially) as that of the spectators, which is never the case in theatre (a real thing in the theatre ceases to be the real thing, and becomes a sign of another thing). A battle reconstruction fulfills all the features of a game that people like

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In this way theatre reveals itself as an art where the principal part is played by a live human being, i.e., the actor¹⁵. Let me repeat that the actor draws everything that materially surrounds him or her on the stage into the fictional realm. Being both himself or herself and the denoted figure, the actor assumes a double deixis, in what Eli Rozik calls the deflection of reference¹⁶. Through the actor's mediation, and thanks to the flexible stream of fictional time, which allows its free modeling, an indexical relationship is formed between the fictional and the real. Owing to that, everything assumes a sign function and ceases to denote itself exclusively, i.e. its "real" self. Theatrical signs are oriented in two basic directions: they signify the elements of the fictional world, and simultaneously draw attention to themselves, that is to their material substance and its modeling. Pointing to a chair and describing it verbally or through gestures as the king's throne, the actor not only creates fiction (makes us imagine the throne, not the chair) but also establishes a relationship between the fictional throne and the material shape of the

to play. However, a battle reconstruction may become theatre, as was the case of the *Siege of the Winter Palace* staged several years after the October Revolution. The same set of human bodies, words, sounds, costumes and light may be a game or a documentary show, but it may become, when differently modeled, an artistic medium or work, where the selection and modeling convey additional information, and justify their appearance in the form given. Also, in the case of theatre, a model of perceiving reality by the fictional figures, impersonated by the actors, different from that of the spectators, is signaled throughout the performance (the juxtaposition of at least two models of perceiving reality, at least one fictional figure's and at least one of the spectator's, is the fundamental way, in which theatre creates meaning).

¹⁵ This is why theatre cannot come to existence without a live actor. Objects, machines, automatons or animals do not have the ability to signal fictional time and space, unless animated by humans. Of course, it is possible to create a scenographic composition such as, for instance, "an Egyptian pyramid under construction", but this in itself will not create the duality of the present time.

¹⁶ On the issue of deixis, see, for instance, Stanton B. Garner, Jr., *Bodied Spaces. Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca and London, 1994), chapter 4: *The Performing "I": Language and the Histrionics of Place*: 120-158, and also my article "A Candle of Darkness: Multiplied *Deixis* in Roberto Ciulli's *King Lear*", in: "Semiotic Analysis of Avant-Garde Performance", edited by Eli Rozik and Yana Meerzon (2008), special edition of *JDTTC* (Spring 2008), pp. 83-102.

chair used in the staging. The meaning of the chair is hence not limited to the throne, but includes its use as a material carrier or vehicle of a conventional sign. This means that the goal of theatre as art is not merely creating an illusion of a fictional realm, but rests in the establishing of a relationship between elements of that realm and the materiality of the stage¹⁷.

What we are dealing with in Martinis's work is video installation: plates, cutlery and dishes (as well as the hands of people taking part in the supper) are projected – as if on a screen – on to a real table, with real chairs standing by it. Still, a projection like this would not disturb in the theatre, where an object does not have to be real and, conversely, a real thing need not signify anything iconically or functionally similar in the fictional world. Even if a chair is not a real chair, a table a real table, a plate a real plate, the ostensive actions of the performer, who signals his or her notice of these objects by touching them, pointing at them or glancing at them, will make even emptiness and absence become signs of objects in the created world. By definition, the fictional world cannot appear on the stage; it can only be denoted by signs, while the substance of a sign does not have to be so shaped as to resemble what it signifies; it can be totally conventional, and does not even have to exist in the material sense. The fictional and the real world are separated by a conventional 'fifth wall', which sets apart at least two streams of time including, on the one hand, the substance of the spectacle (i.e. signaling

¹⁷ Theatre as a medium creates meaning in a distinct way. What counts is not the denoted meaning (fiction), but the relationship of that meaning to the substance and modeling of the signaling matter, employed in a given production to generate the meaning. Since the substance and modeling are different in every production, so are the meanings they generate. In literature, the substance of the text is usually irrelevant to the meaning. If we treated a theatrical performance as "praxis", then we would see only the actors at work. In theatre we see both, the actor at work and, in our mind's eye, the fictional figure he/she describes/denotes: the theatrical meaning is the relationship between the two. This may be further explained by cognitive studies, and the theory of blended spaces in particular. See, for instance, Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, "Blending as a Central Problem of Grammar" (1998), an article available on the home page of the authors. See also their book *The Way We Think. Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

material), and on the other, the meanings denoted by signs¹⁸. Meanings in theatre, in turn, are generated through confrontation of the real with the fictional. That is why theatre attempts not only to create an illusion of a fictional world but also to confront it with what materially exists on the stage, including the actor's body, costume, stage set, music, words, and so on. Everything, even language, when drawn into theatrical semiosis, carries the duality that is so typical of the theatre¹⁹. It denotes both itself

¹⁸ I have discussed the concept of the fifth wall in my book *Piąty wymiar teatru*, op. cit. I shall provide at least a basic definition of the concept. So far, scholarship has only distinguished the invisible fourth wall, which separates the box stage from the auditorium and is often identified with the bourgeois theatre and its aesthetics. The abolition of this wall is often a sign of breaking through fossilized conventions. The reader is obviously familiar with the concept of the fourth wall, and that needs no further explanation, but the appearance of the fifth one may be somewhat misleading. However, I have come to understand the "fourth wall" as a metaphor rather than a literal reference to the "missing wall" in the proscenium stage. In my understanding, the "fourth wall" may refer to any type of stage, meaning the temporal and spatial distance created by the actors from the audience. The "fifth wall," on the other hand, refers to the invisible divide between the material and non-material, the vehicle of the sign and its denoted meaning, the physical and fictional time, etc. Basically, it is the invisible boundary between two time streams — two present times, two temporal dimensions, separating the material substance from the fictional sphere: separating human bodies, props, costumes, music and the like from what all this signaling matter denotes in the fictional realm. In addition, the fifth wall marks the division between the two spheres governed by different laws of physics, and that includes geometry (space) and, most importantly, time.

¹⁹ I am somewhat hesitant to use the word "language" in connection with theatre. This is too complex a matter to be even touched upon in a brief article, but I prefer to use the phrase "stage speech" rather than language. It seems to me that what constitutes stage speech is less dependent on grammar than its linguistic source, and on the stage becomes entangled in very complex relationships with all material substances used in a given production, whether material or non-material, whether live (like human bodies) or inanimate. It seems to me (and I am in position to prove this) that in theatre one does not only listen to language as spoken by the actors, but, paradoxically, one also watches it. So, verbal comprehension requires at least two senses, and not just one. Some of these problems are tackled by Eli Rozik in his inspiring articles "The Vocabulary of Theatrical Language", *Assaph*, Section C, No. 2 (1985), pp. 15-26, "The Syntax of theatrical Communication", *Assaph*, Section C, No. 3 (1986), pp. 43-57, and "The

as material reality, together with a real network of relationships (for instance, proxemic, compositional, kinetic or acoustic) and the denoted world, whose conceptual shape need not resemble the material substance of the signs that create it. As I have remarked, a chair does not have to be a chair in the fictional world; it may just as well stand for an executioner's block or a preacher's pulpit, it may become a sign of a horse, with an actor galloping on it around the stage, as boys do; or it may not exist at all in the material sense of the word. In Chinese theatre, for instance, the passing of a considerable period of time is signified by an actor sitting on a chair (stool) and remaining motionless for about a minute. A year passes, or five (in this case the length of time is signaled verbally); yet in the world of fiction the stage chair does not denote a chair, but – together with the actor's motionless body – the passing of a considerable period of time (just as the actor's body does not stand for the body of a sitting man). The material carrier of a sign does not denote the substance it is made of. Similarly, in Elizabethan theatres, the stage doors did not necessarily mean doors in the fictional world²⁰. A convention is needed to comprehend the signaled meaning, as the denoted concept does not overlap in any way with the sign's substance. There is no resemblance here, and consequently not even an iconic relationship.

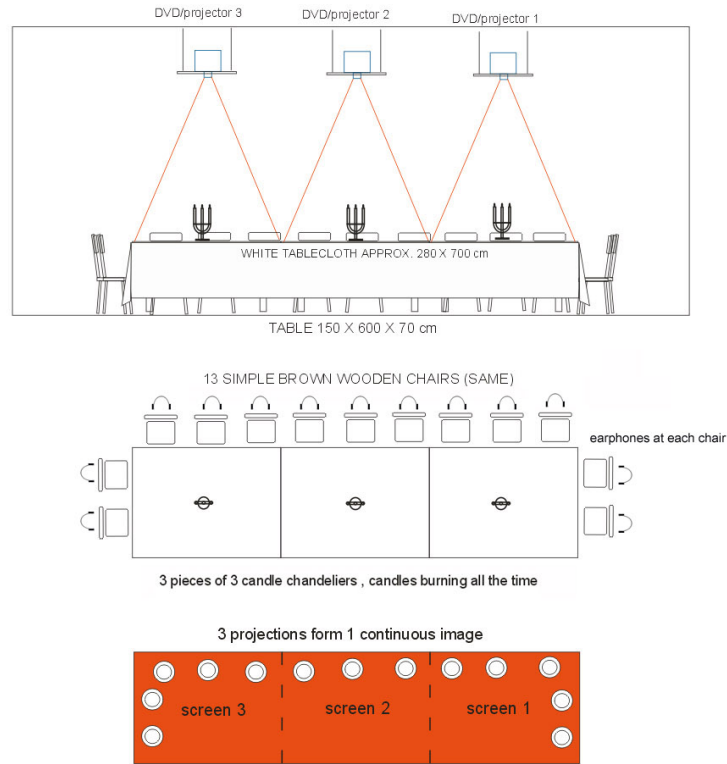
Martinis's work exhibits a table laid for supper (see illustrations). There are thirteen seats at the table, thirteen place settings and a corresponding number of chairs. Cultural and religious codes are evident here, invoked by the title, ironic though it may be, and the visual composition of the entire work. Lit candles are real, and their light marks the pace of time of the Supper as congruous with the pace of real physical time, although that does not mean at all that the Supper is set in the real temporal continuum and the actual present time. It could under certain circumstances be a sign of and set in the fictional present, thus becoming theatre, as I shall explain later. In the physical or bodily sense, there are no participants in the Supper. However, their hands are present, taking part; this (like the texts in different languages swiftly flashing over the table) is also part of the video installation. It follows that the hands metonymically signify the presence of fictional (non-material)

Functions of Language in the Theatre", *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 104–114.

²⁰ Ichikawa, Mariko "Were the doors Open or Closed? The Use of Stage Doors in the Shakespearean Theatre" *Theatre Notebook*, 60:1 (2006), pp. 5–29.

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SUPPER AT LAST installation layout



Important: - All 3 DVDs should be started simultaneously!
- Sound: only on DVD 2
- Amplifier/Loudspeakers: under the table

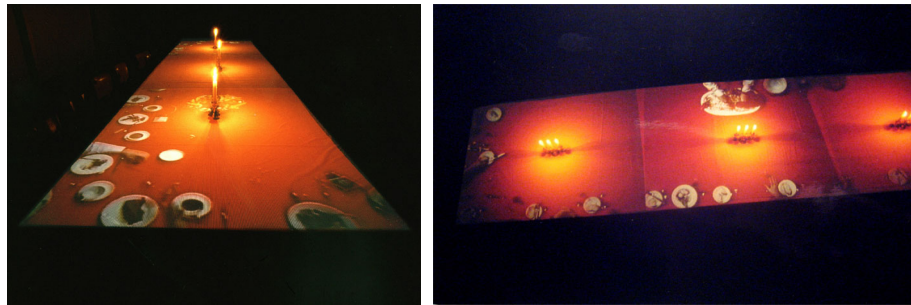
figures, hence they may also, at least potentially, mark the fictional time, i.e. the fictional present, although a video recording is always set in the past. We also have twelve recorded voices, most of them from the twentieth century, which strengthen the time passed. These are actual recordings, not imitations of the ‘originals’, not necessarily belonging to the “metonymic hands” projected on to the table. In fact they do not really match in the logic of empirical reality. They speak different

languages and seemingly isolated texts within seemingly different spaces, yet as we come to understand not necessarily within different times, because their common presence is metonymically signaled by the aforementioned hands. It is the hands that constitute a common temporal denominator. Among the voices are those of Winston Churchill, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, James Joyce, Andy Warhol, Donald Duck and Sigmund Freud. Also, there is a radio "time announcer," providing something that is called "global time". Thus, what we have here are metonymic signs of people connected with creativity, literature, art, film, pop-art, and also politics, science and cartoons. Equipped with earphones, spectators/participants can listen to each of the voices as they change seats. As the work reveals itself in a unique configuration to each of the recipients, everybody takes it in differently, while no-one can get a general view of the whole, as they can never watch themselves. The thirteenth channel is silence. We understand that silence does not originate in the twentieth century but when read through the codes of the New Testament in the first. It does not imply, of course, that the silence is not semantic.

The variety of languages used does not preclude their being one behind the fifth wall, i.e., in the fictional world. In the way so characteristic of theatre, the actor's verbal utterance becomes the sign of the figure's verbal utterance, whereas what the actor says does not have to be identical with what the figure says (for instance, the actor speaks in verse, the figure in prose; the actor speaks English, the figure Latin). The same rule applies for silence: the stage silence does not have to imply the silence of fictional figures. Everything is possible in the world of theatre, because fictional time and space are flexible, and can be shaped at will. One can combine different historical times and spaces into one spatio-temporal realm. The problem here is that none of the voices implies that the actual dialogue is taking place. Even though these voices create a sort of a palimpsest, and first-century silence can peacefully co-exist with twentieth-century conversation, factually the "history" of human creativity speaks in different voices. A temporal and spatial ellipsis is thus formed, which paradoxically connects and blends time and history, instead of separating, but through bringing them together at one table and at one time, the artist stresses, again paradoxically, through all sorts of equivalences, their separateness. What we, the spectators/participants make of this is left to our individual connotative interpretation. It is the

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human mind that has the power to make sense out of the separate voices belonging to the metaphoric apostles of history²¹. The voices and silence are brought together by the table, which either resembles or actually is, so to say, scenographic space. When ‘exhibited’ for us to watch, the table no longer belongs to the real world only. It is an artistic installation that, upon being recognized, requires that its participants activate receptors different from the ones that we normally use to take in perceiving the empirical world. As a work of art it wants us to discover the rules that enabled its appearance in the shape given. It also prompts all sorts of possible interpretations of the installation. For instance, in the metaphoric sense, the silence may signify the silence of God, or the silence of the gods. Or, in general terms, it could mean that the voice of metaphysics is not heard any more; it could stress our inability to hear what is important or relevant. Instead, what is heard are the voices of false idols, science, literature, art and pop-art. As the title of the installation suggests, the Last Supper motif and significance has been replaced by consumption, the literal lingering for food (“supper at last!”).



Thus, the recorded voices belong to real people and cartoon characters who, we are justified in supposing, historically never either met or supped together. They never spoke with one another. The voices indicate spatial and temporal separation (which is also linguistic: a veritable tower of Babel, with a hint of cartoon), but at the same time the table and the hands bring them together into a common time and space.

²¹ The silent (or: silenced?) Word is in our times replaced by the verbal noises of all sorts.

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They make them sit together. The table signifies that the voices and hands may be treated as metonymies of real live people talking and taking part in the same supper. The fact that they speak different tongues is rather irrelevant: as I have already underlined, what really counts in theatre is the relationship between the fictional (as it gains shape in the mind of the recipient) and the real. We are thus dealing with a paradox: by means of convention, what we actually hear can be turned into a sign of an imaginary dialogue, of a conversation at the table that we cannot hear, because it is taking place in the fictional or mental world, which is non-material by definition. This dialogue is entirely conjectural, as is the case with the whole fictional world, which can at most be an imaginary mental construct. Yet everything is possible in the conventionality of theatre and in the ways the human mind works. In the theatre, all that glitters is gold; it is gold even when it does not glitter; what is needed is only a signal that at least one of the fictional figures treats whatever substance as gold. However, the meaning is not an illusion of gold, but the relationship of the idea of gold to the substance that stands for it.



Still, going back to Martinis's work, this is not yet theatre, as what we are dealing with is not a true dialogue occurring within a fictional time, but rather some kind of internal voices, monologues, or perhaps even

utterances of the type of a soliloquy²². Let me repeat: the voices can be heard only through the earphones; ascribed to a certain seat at the table, they do not merge acoustically. This foregrounds their separateness. Each exists in isolation; it is only in the consciousness and memory of the recipient that the voices may form various relationships or be blended together. Just like history, which may be seen as individual voices/narratives of the past remembered²³. Moreover, as I have already noted, theatre requires the performance of a live human being, for only a live human being is capable of signaling the temporal reality of the present time through his or her very presence. The real present time can then be contrasted with the overlapping fictional present of the created world. Here, in turn, we are dealing with a recording (being a record of the past tense, a video cannot call into being a live person set in his or her present). What we have here is a “theatre” that does not entirely meet its systemic rules, something not unlike quasi-theatre. It is actually an audio-video installation combined with a stage set that alludes to certain art codes of the past (the number of “Last Suppers” in art is amazing indeed; naturally, Martinis’s work enters into a dialogue with the artistic past). “Performing installation” is the right phrase, when seen as a work of art, since what we watch is really happening in the here and now of the recipient; whereas what is invoked by means of signs and codes is taking place elsewhere and within a different time of historical fiction. The installation brings different and separate voices of history together in the mind of the recipient. On the semantic level, it also metaphorically juxtaposes the voices of the twentieth century (noise?) with the silence of the first century. This provides a strong element of theatricality²⁴, but what is still missing is a live performer. As indicated, at least two modes

²² On the subject of soliloquy see my article “Shakespeare's Soliloquies and Asides: A Theoretical Perspective,” *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny*, Vol. LII, No. 4/2005, pp. 301-23.

²³ History does not exist in any material sense. It exists only as a network of narratives concerning the past, with human memory (and its recordings) being one of the narratives.

²⁴ See Eli Rozik, “Acting: The Quintessence of Theatricality”, *SubStance* 31 (2002), 110-124, and his “Is the Notion of ‘Theatricality’ Void?”, *Gestos*, Vo. 15, No. 30, (November 2000), pp. 11-30. See also Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction: Theatricality: A Key Concept in Theatre and Cultural Studies”, *Theatre Research International*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 85-89.

of reading what is seemingly the same reality on the stage is the *sine qua non* of theatre. I write "seemingly" because the ontic world of the stage does not exist in the denoted world: it can only be the substance of signs (representations, if you will). The rule includes everything visible and audible on the stage: human bodies, objects, light, and language. The latter can only be a sign of the language used by the fictional figures, something that the spectators cannot hear.

In other words, what I have described so far neither creates the fictional present nor generates a fictional time stream through its confrontation with the present and with the stream of time flowing in reality. What we hear and see can only denote some past time (the present of the recording is, obviously enough, something completely different); even the table does not necessarily have to denote the present or signify the flow of time identical with the temporal continuum experienced and lived by the audience. The table in itself, accompanied by the voices, may be an installation signifying the past tense exclusively, referring only to the past, as a speaking picture would. This is due to the fact that the actual presence of the figures from the past is not signaled in any way: the seats are taken by the actual recipients/participants of Martinis's work, and the video projection and the voices are recordings, hence they are set in the past. Let me add that what is necessary to bring Marilyn Monroe into being as a fictional figure in our present is precisely the aforementioned human 'mediator', who would signal his or her notice of the figure as a real person. Out of itself, an object is not capable of signaling the temporal flow or its inclusion in the flowing fictional time, which may be the reason why one of the voices announces time. A thing cannot change its deixis, because it does not have one. As no fictional present is signaled in any way, there can be no confrontation with the real one. This does not meet the systemic rules of theatre. It may be at most theatre-like, or theatre in the metaphorical sense of the word, as often practiced by the advocates of performativity. An analogical situation would occur if the fictional figures were pictured, for instance, in the form of cardboard stencils seated on chairs or mannequins, even if deceptively lifelike. Wax figures on display will not make theatre, even when posed in theatrical postures and scenes. They may become theatre only when a living human being starts acting and signaling to the spectators that he or she is 'reading' them as live persons set in the paradoxical reality of the fictional world (of course, theatre will also come

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into being if they are wax figures or mannequins even in the created world, as long as the human actor signals their inclusion in a different time).



Still, at this point Martinis accomplishes something even more intricate. As indicated, he seats his spectators (recipients) behind the table, thus making them participants in the performance. In this way, those at the table enter into a spatio-temporal relationship with everything that is laid on the table, i.e., with the plate, the food and the eating hands (it is not the hands that eat, of course). In this way the hands are ascribed to the participant, to whom they now belong and for whom they perform actions conventionally and culturally accepted while eating a meal. Moreover, as the artist observed himself²⁵, some of the persons placed their hands over the image of the hands projected on the table surface in front of them and followed their movements (but, of course, it is impossible to replace them since the projection comes from above and “falls” over their hands too: in this way one time is superimposed on the other). This means also that the time of the projected hands merges with the biological time of the spectators, which could provide for the basic rule of temporal duality, the past blending with the present; so, what is achieved are two input spaces that now may be blended in the mind of the external recipient, the spectator, who is not one of the people seated

²⁵ In the e-mail quoted above.

at the table. If that condition is fulfilled, the stream of fictional time merges with the real time at the point the moment the spectator perceives as his/her present. However, that is still missing here: with the "audience" seated at the table we lack an external spectator who would be in position to grasp that duality and create a mental construct or blend in his/her mind. Otherwise, the installation with the participants constitutes a form of a game, and may be treated as such.

Having become live complements of the metonymy signaled by the installation, the recipients-turned-participants are made to enter into a spatial relationship with everything on the table – with the work's actual substance, that is its signaling matter. On becoming components of the work, the recipients themselves start to realize that they are to take the indexical relationship as a fact in their receptive processes and behavior (in some sense, they have it imposed on them). With the help of the voices, they come to understand whose seat they have taken. The fictional figure's time, with which the recipient need not identify, signifies the past, yet the hands are connected with both the past and the present. They are split, as is precisely the case with theatrical signs. The recipient/participant, in turn, becomes the aforementioned mediator in the process of overlapping of the past with the present. In this way the past finds its culmination in the recipient's present and creates – by implication – a stream of time: the Supper ceases to be a single historical event, symbolically linking up instead with all the suppers ever held, as well as with the artistic tradition of presenting the Last Supper (as in Leonardo da Vinci's fresco), with which Martinis enters into dialogue. Still, this is not theatre. Why? Because, as indicated, the recipient's time, also when he or she becomes part of the work as a performer, remains real time and their space the real space where Martinis's scenic installation is taking place. The recipient, as already shown, is the mediator between the past and the present, but not between two present times, and it is this latter link that creates theatre. Also, the individual participant is not the addressee of the whole, and is not even capable of perceiving the whole. However, if the people seated at the table engage in a dialogue with the artist, who creates an explicit message directed at them, they can signal this as actors when they accept the part imposed on them. It is enough that they sit and do nothing to disrupt the spatial relationship with the table and plate, or break the rules of comportment at the table. Yet even this is not precisely theatre. Why? Because for the

theatre to exist there has to be a spectator whose presence is not noticed by the performer (in this way the latter signals his/her time, different from the spectator's). It is only an external spectator who is in position to perceive theatre properly, for theatre is, basically, a mental process stirred by the signaling matter on the stage. Indeed, during the actual presentation, some of the people present preferred to watch rather than take the role of the performer at the table. This brings the installation even closer to theatre.

Thus, theatre would emerge if the work discussed were watched by a spectator who was the addressee of the entire "performed" installation, provided the performers at the table would pretend not to notice anyone watching. He or she would then witness a thoroughly conventional situation of a theatrical nature, where signs of fictional figures would be made up of the elements of video installation: plates, cutlery, dishes, hands and the live bodies of the people at the table. Even the voices are not needed: people are alive and if they accept the parts imposed on them and start 'playing', that is behaving in the manner foreseen in the script — even if this just involves not noticing the spectator — they thus signal their inclusion in a time and space other than the real ones. The present is hence split into two times, the fictional and the real, which is an essential feature of theatre. Owing to this, a theatrically expressed confrontation of the fictional and the real takes place, with concomitant appearance of a seemingly shared future, and these may be treated as two input spaces, blending into the resultant space in the mind of the spectator, as cognitivists would have it.

Obviously enough, in the case of the installation under discussion there is no guarantee that the people seated behind the table will take on theatrical parts. If they do, the external spectator will deal with a thoroughly theatrical situation; if they do not — with an installation, which we might even call scenic or performing. There is one more thing that deserves attention: if theatre does occur, it will exist only in the receptive processes of the external spectator, and not in those of the performers/actors seated at the table. Of course, the theatrical perception described would be deprived of the acoustic element of the "performance", and its semantics would be severely altered, if not undermined (the spectator would see the people seated at the table listening to something, but would not hear the voices). It is the external spectator who then becomes the addressee of the work that ceases to be

an installation and becomes a piece of theatre, and who can encompass the whole; while the performers/actors are turned into the signaling components of the work/event, and as such they cannot be its addressees. Presumably, the situation investigated does not correspond with the artist's intentions, so whether theatre emerges can only be a matter of chance. On the other hand, it is worth noting that theatre may occur irrespective of the artist's intentions. In the case of a performing installation we are dealing with participation, and not with 'exhibition' or 'spectacle' in the theatrical sense of the word (once again, this issue will be differently perceived by performativity). Inscribed into the work, the recipient takes an active part in the process of its revelation, but does not become the spectator, in whose mind the theatre comes into being. For theatre is, indeed, a mental process.

One may also – this time entirely hypothetically – try to consider what would happen if Martinis went one step further and introduced a live person/actor into his installation, which basically is a still life somewhat enriched by the voices. This would indeed make it possible for us to interpret the entire installation as a work of theatre. The missing link is precisely the human body, a live person who would signal being set in a different time, even without saying a word. Imagine a situation where chairs being left empty – some extras would be introduced on to the stage in the role of servants as if changing plates and cutlery and serving new dishes. The latter could even be immaterial, remaining a video projection. This could even be realized in a conventional way, accompanying the video recording showing the eating hands. It is also in this case that we cross the boundary between theatre and non-theatre. This is because we are dealing with live people who – being parts of the whole – introduce the missing complement, that is the fictional present time and its flow, as well as the real present time identical with the spectators' present, all seemingly sharing the same future. The act of changing plates, along with the light of the candles, and the movement of the hands, signal the passing of time while 'eating'. The fictional future and the real future materialize simultaneously on the stage. The two models of deciphering what is on the stage – now the use of the word is finally justified – are thus confronted: that of the performers and that of the spectators. The performers, in turn, signal the actual bodily presence of the figures. The hands become the metonyms of the whole bodies. This can happen owing to the servants' physical presence and to their

ostensive actions, which make possible the formation of an indexical relationship – one of spatial contiguity or of causal character – between the human body and the substance of the signaling matter together with its modeling. We can see that there is nobody there, yet the performers, or – as might now be said – actors²⁶, signal that there is somebody there, and what is more this somebody is taking an active part in the supper (which is signaled by the changing plates and cutlery, as well as by the new dishes). For an external spectator this would be theatre.

Let us add that non-material signs of presence are no novelty in theatre. What matters is that somebody signals this presence, establishing – let us repeat – an indexical relationship. Meaning is thus generated: the denoted physicality of the speaking figures is confronted with what is on the stage, i.e., with the objective lack of presence. What is needed to comprehend the aforementioned meaning, i.e. the fictional figures' presence, is a convention, due to which a voice becomes a metonymy of a figure really seated by a real table. Hence, if he had introduced a live person on to the stage, even in the role of a waiter, Martinis would have created a work of theatre. This would happen because separate temporal structures signaled in the work would lead to the creation of a split present – a distinctive feature of theatre as art – which would result in the confrontation of what is denoted with how it is 'read' by the live actors²⁷. Although in our hypothetical spectacle the

²⁶ Acting is an extremely complicated theoretical issue. I have tackled it in previous publications, available in Polish (an English version is in progress). For a theoretical scrutiny that does not concentrate on the actor's psychology, or his/her work on preparing a role, see, for instance, articles by Jiří Veltruský, "Contribution to the Semiotics of Acting", *Sound, Sign and Meaning. Quinquagenary of the Prague Linguistic Circle*, ed. by Ladislav Matejka (Ann Arbor, 1978), pp. 553 - 606, "Acting and Behaviour: A Study in the *Signans*", *Semiotics of Drama and Theatre. New Perspectives in the Theory of Drama and Theatre*, ed. by Herta Schmid and Aloysius Van Kesteren (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1984), pp. 393 - 441; see also an intriguing article by Eli Rozik, "Acting: The Quintessence of Theatricality", *SubStance*, vol. 31, nos. 2 & 3 (2002), pp. 110 -124.

²⁷ The presence of the live body is the most important single factor that makes theatre possible (a recording cannot be theatre, because it is set in the past). A coma patient cannot be an actor, because he/she cannot act in the artistic sense of the word (similarly, objects or animals cannot act, even if the latter are trained to behave in a certain way). Of course, this brings us to the necessity of defining

latter do not speak, their very physical presence and ostension are enough to mark the flow of fictional time in which the figures 'live'. In the material sense, these figures owe their metonymic existence to the 'eating hands' and consequently, as the spectator's imaginative construct, they are seated on the seemingly empty chairs at the table. There is one condition, though: the performers should not notice the presence of the spectators. Even not saying a word, in this way they can still signal their inclusion in a different time and space. This would therefore be theatre in its pure form, exhibiting rules that have led to the creation of the work in this shape, not another. As always in the case of art, the work or event also – or predominantly – talks about itself and the rules that make its creation possible. It explains its own existence in the shape given. Owing to this its aesthetic function reveals itself.

At the same time, the 'hypothetical' analysis just conducted indicates that the boundaries of theatre and non-theatre, or art and non-art, are real and can be verifiably delineated. Without the actors and without spectators who are external in relation to the work, it ceases to be theatre. It is a work of art, an event, a scenic performing installation, but not theatre. What is more, if the performers – for instance, real recipients seated by the table – signaled their inclusion in the here and now by noticing the spectators' presence, the work would stop being theatre, as the performer would lose the ability to mediate between the real and the fictional, to function as a catalyst in the process of their blending; by setting himself or herself only in the spectators' time and space, he or she becomes incapable of signaling inclusion in a different time and space. In this case we are dealing with another kind of art, which is not theatre. Still, the meanings, in the sense of the denoted fiction, can be almost identical. A king's throne may be signified as well by the material lack of a chair as by the chair's substantial presence. However, what matters in art is not only 'what' but also – if not most importantly – 'how', that is the relationship between what is denoted and what denotes, or between the plane of expression and the plane of content. This is the true meaning of the work and the method of this meaning's generation, which is where the aesthetic function reveals itself. It is not true that the theatre of today

acting, which I consider to be the art of creating fictional present time. Naturally, we can renounce that, saying that all human behavior is acting etc., and we shall end up in the same dead end?, as when discussing what theatre is while using the notion in an allegorical way..

is witnessing the final dissolution of the boundaries and rules of separate disciplines; on the contrary, balancing on the boundary between theatre and other arts, Martinis's fascinating and highly original work indicates the existence of this boundary, and allows it to be delineated precisely. What the recipient/participant, foreseen by the artist, will perceive as a work of video installation may also become a work of theatre for someone who is a spectator of the whole. It is up to the researcher to determine the circumstances in which this paradoxical phenomenon may occur.

One may well ask, "Is that important?" The answer is yes, it is important, because upon the recipient's recognition of the work/part of reality presented to him/her depends the assumed strategy of perception and cognition. When we watch a movie, we do not perceive it as a spatio-temporal extension of our reality. Similar is the case with theatre, which in many ways should be treated as a mental process. All theatre signs reveal a double orientation: on the one hand they are oriented towards the fictional realm, which they denote or describe, on the other, towards their own material substance²⁸. They are self-referential. Substance is (part of) the meaning, a fact often neglected in scholarship. For, as I have already indicated, theatre is substance-specific. And it is the signifiers that react on the stage producing the signified, which are only implied or denoted. In this way, the chemistry of the theatre blends the material substances visible and audible on the stage, engaged in all sorts of reactions, with the mental space of the spectator where the effect of those reactions appears. This provides the basis for the final reaction to take place, which is the blending of the three spaces, the generic (authorial), the phenomenal and the signified; thus, let me repeat, the ultimate meaning in theatre is not simply referential, the immediate signified of the stage signifiers, but the relationship of that denoted meaning to the substance used and the formula with which it is employed on the stage,

²⁸ Of course, I am not the first one to notice this. See, for instance, Anne Ubersfeld, *Reading Theatre*, translated by Frank Collins, ed. and with a foreword by Paul Perron and Patrick Debbèche (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 1999), who writes: "...we can say that the [stage] text has constructed its own referent upon the stage, and the stage space presents the text's referential space. The stage sign has the paradoxical twofold status of signifier and referent" (p. 102).

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and last but not least the individual characteristics of the perceiving mind. Thus we, the spectators, are expected to switch from one way of perceiving reality to another one, which is not automatic and demands extra attention, just as if we were treating the stage signals as a sort of an unusual text, an event if you like, a communiqué. And Martinis's work shows us precisely how a work of art may prompt us to be perceived in the way it wants to be perceived. Moreover, it shows us that the same signaling matter, depending on circumstances, may be a "performing installation" or theatre.

Note: all images and figures in this text are courtesy of Dalibor Martinis.

(See <http://liminalites.net/6-1/martinis.html> for a video supplement to this text.)



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