

Risk

This was written in response to an Israeli artist's question about risk.

Risk is not something we (as director and performers) discuss a great deal, although I know that it does play a large part in the performers' work, even though it is not formally articulated.

The first thing I would say is that risk does not seem to be something that can be engaged voluntarily. Risk is either present or not - it is not a matter of decision.

This means that risk is something that has to be inherent in the structure of the performance itself, not in the attitude of the performer.

This is important because a lot of performer discussion centres around the notions of risk and security. To a certain extent all live performance is risk based (hence nerves). But there is a world of difference between the risk element associated with live work in general, and the specific attempt to engage a contemporary notion of risk.

So what introduces risk into the structure of a performance? I would say that predictability and risk are mutually incompatible. Risk entails a degree of unpredictability. By this I mean a future course of events that is not known until it happens.

Traditional acting techniques are actually based on the elimination of risk (quite understandably). That is the performer knows what is going to happen (or what is meant to happen) and the technique of acting is geared towards the generation of the illusion of spontaneity in the moment of repetition / recall (Barba's decided body?)

The illusory technique of spontaneity is based on the moment of resolution. Resolution of the cycle of action.

That is the end of the action is already present in the beginning, and the performer's job is to time the resolution in line with rehearsal decisions. In this way the work is less to do with starting points than with end points. A sequence of work is split up into action cycles in this way. This is not a matter of length of time either. The famous solo in Einstein on the Beach (Wilson) lasts 30 minutes - but that is the point: the ending is present the moment it has begun - however far away that moment may be it is still a finite, and a predictable moment. This may be considered a risk in purely aesthetic terms but I would not call it a risk for the performer, who knows when it is going to end, and hence what is going to happen (ie the future).

In this example you could say that the future is not present, only the past, which is recreating a fictional future via the technique.

Is it possible to work with the future in a non-fictional way? This seems to me to be the central question regarding risk. In social/existential terms this also seems to be crucial. Giddens for example says 'modernity is a risk culture' and goes on to argue 'the future is continually drawn into the present'. As a sociologist he sees implications in social organisation and activity: 'To accept risk as risk, an orientation that is forced on us by the abstract systems of modernity, is to acknowledge that no aspects of our activities follow a pre-determined course, and all are open to contingent happenings'.

It is strange to contemplate the thought that a great deal of performance does not comply with this and so might be considered in some way to be a relief, or an escape from the existential dilemma of modernity (however much the performance may try to 'represent' it). This is of course quite a legitimate aim, and culture generally has always had by and large a conserving role. What is odd about the present conditions is that the conservation may be taking place in the very name of change or transformation, because the conserving elements are embedded in the deep structures of the work, not in its surface statements.

For this reason I believe that contemporary conditions place a particular challenge to performance, which is in some way to go beyond representation, and to engage with the

nature of the contemporary in a different way. The dilemma is that the very decision to perform seems to negate the essence of what is required - uncertainty, randomness, complexity. And so it seems to me that you have to take the decision not to perform. And yet still place yourself in front of spectators, in a space. Here we are embedded in what I would call the heart of the risk question. Under these conditions, performance may or may not happen. Either result is actually out of your control. You can hope against hope that it will occur, but you cannot make it happen. Under these conditions the performer is critically not in control of the performance event. Again, a central aspect of risk.

Perversely, once liberated from the responsibility of making performance, the performer can also feel very powerful, independent, in control of him/herself, if not of the performance event. Here we touch on a deep question of a performer's (and a spectator's for that matter) relationship to their presence / being there / being in the world. At this level also the performer can again release a notion of control - indeed has to. You cannot keep yourself independent and cut off as it were - safe somehow. So this introduces the notion of critical edge, or boundary.

The performer has to get as close as possible to the critical edge of performing, without performing. And since this edge is not fixed but fluid, this is matter of constant attention / engagement and never a matter of certainty. You can never be sure you are at the actual edge or line. So this removes the idea of risk taking place at any one particular time, or in relation to one particular action. Risk is constantly present, and the only respite from it occurs at the moment of resolution of the performance itself, at the end.

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