
EMBRACING AMBIVALENCE - SITUATING ART BETWEEN THE MATERIAL AND THE METAPHYSICAL.

JAN-PHILIPP POSSMANN

JAN-PHILIPP POSSMANN STUDEERDE THEATER-
WETENSCHAP EN POLITICOLOGIE IN BERLIJN.
HU IS WERKZAAM ALS REGISSEUR EN DRAMATURG.
BIJ THIS PERFORMANCE VAN DAVID WEBER-
KREBS WAS HIJ ALS DRAMATURG BETROKKEN.

DAVID WEBER-KREBS (1974, DUITSLAND, BELGIË)
STUDEERDE FRANSE LITERATUUR EN RELIGIE-
STUDIES IN FRIBOURG (CH) EN BERLIJN
EN VOLGDE DE MIMEOPLEIDING AAN DE HOGE-
SCHOOL VOOR DE KUNSTEN IN AMSTERDAM.

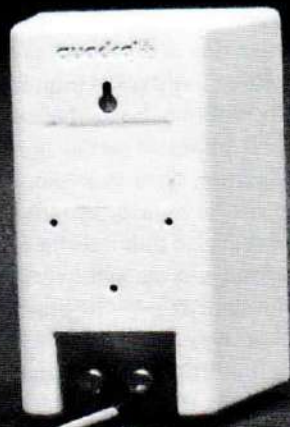
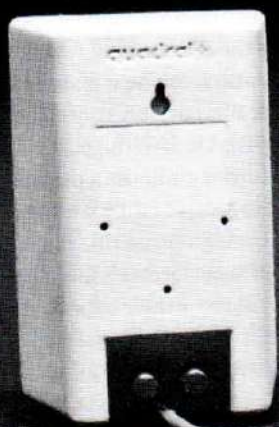
IN ZIJN WERK BEWEEGT HIJ ZICH TUSSEN FILM,
PERFORMANCE-ART EN FYSIEK THEATER. HIJ DE-
FINIEERT ZICHZELF ALS 'EEN MAKER VAN EINDES'.

THIS PERFORMANCE IS EEN VERHALEND GEDICHT
DAT MET EEN GROOT AANTAL AANKONDIGINGEN
TELKENS WEER NIEUWE VERWACHTINGEN SCHEPT.
OP HET OOG GEBEURT ER NIETS OP HET LEGE
TONEEL. MAAR TOCH ONTWIKKELT DE RUIMTE EEN
EIGEN LEVEN. THIS PERFORMANCE SPEELT MET
DE FRICTIE TUSSEN VERLANGEN EN ERVARING,
TUSSEN DE WENS NAAR HET SUBLIEME EN DE
REALISATIE DAARVAN. THIS PERFORMANCE GING
OP 21 OKTOBER 2004 IN PREMIÈRE TIJDENS HET
PLATEAUX FESTIVAL IN FRANKFURT.

There exists a video that David Weber-Krebs did as part of a video installation project which was never finished and never publicly shown. Faces slowly appear out of a dark background, glimpse into the camera and then disappear again in the darkness covering the edges of the frame. The rhythm is very slow, presumably filmed in slow motion, the scene calm, almost ghostly. It remains unclear where the faces come from and where they are going. The relationship between camera, cinematographer and the people filmed is ambivalent – the movement could result from the camera's own motion as well as from theirs, the people could be performing or they could be passers-by, unaware of the camera's gaze. Yet in stark contrast to this ambivalence, the faces themselves stand out very clearly. For a short moment, their eyes directly face ours and the intensity of this gaze pierces through the dim haze of the black and white scene. It seems like a freeze frame: Isolated from their surrounding by the blackness encompassing the scene, each face becomes at the same time very alive and emblematic, intensely personal and abstract. The next split second, the movement continues and we realize that the gaze might not have been directed towards us at all, but towards something else visible or invisible – in any case beyond our scope.

To me, this video sequence is in many ways representative of David's ambitions as an artist and his artistic efforts up to his most recent one, *This Performance*. They are efforts because David is aiming at something that seems impossible or at least very hard to achieve. As much as can be said in few words, David is trying to combine an intense feeling for the metaphysical with an almost obsessive interest in the material essence, the physical, the concrete.

Before I go on to explain this in more detail, I want to specify the term 'metaphysical'. Big terminologies like these are easily misleading. They tend to have more reference to their respective intellectual discourses than to human experience. Still, 'metaphysical' seemed to be the least tricky of available terms. What I am referring to is – simply and quite literally – the matters behind the matter. We usually experience these either in feelings of lack and longing in the material world or in a vague sense of an addition or unknown depth to the material world. Of course – these sensations are as diverse as are people. Religion poses but one of many communal efforts in dealing with this diversity. But as I will try to show, diversity is not the only problem in aesthetically dealing with the metaphysical. Let me come back to the video sequence once



more: The title of it is 'escale'. But on the DVD cover it is called 'end'. David explained to me that the project was supposed to be entitled 'escale' but it never made it to the end, while 'end' was merely the title of this episode. No matter what will eventually become of it – the fact that 'escale' never got finished and that the only remains are titled 'end' is striking. It hints at the difficulty of David's approach. After all, as an artist David describes himself as 'a producer of endings'. The endings however are open, unfinished and there is a continuity among them which make them very inspiring to deal with.

The word 'escale' relates to the video having been shot at the bottom end of an escalator, where people are moved downwards and into the focus of the camera and then walk out of it again. They don't know they are being filmed, their eyes might focus on some object of economic desire in one of the shopping windows facing them. (Thus there is little sublime or spiritual awe here.) The title also is a play on words: The English term 'escalator' clearly carries implications of rise and elevation while the French term 'escale' refers to a journey's stopover or harbour. The filmed scene can therefore be read in two ways: as an intermediate, momentary presence, a glimpse at a person's face before disappearing in the crowd, or as a deeply religious analogy, like a scene from Dante's 'Divine Comedy', where the souls pass before our eyes on their way from heaven to earth – or from earth to hell for that matter. Their look could be the look of knowing, their eyes could be eyes that have seen eternity and that give us but a glimpse of it. But – we never know. Thus, the metaphysical in 'escale' is quite ambivalent. It is not forcing itself upon us, quite to the contrary: it is there, yet it is not.

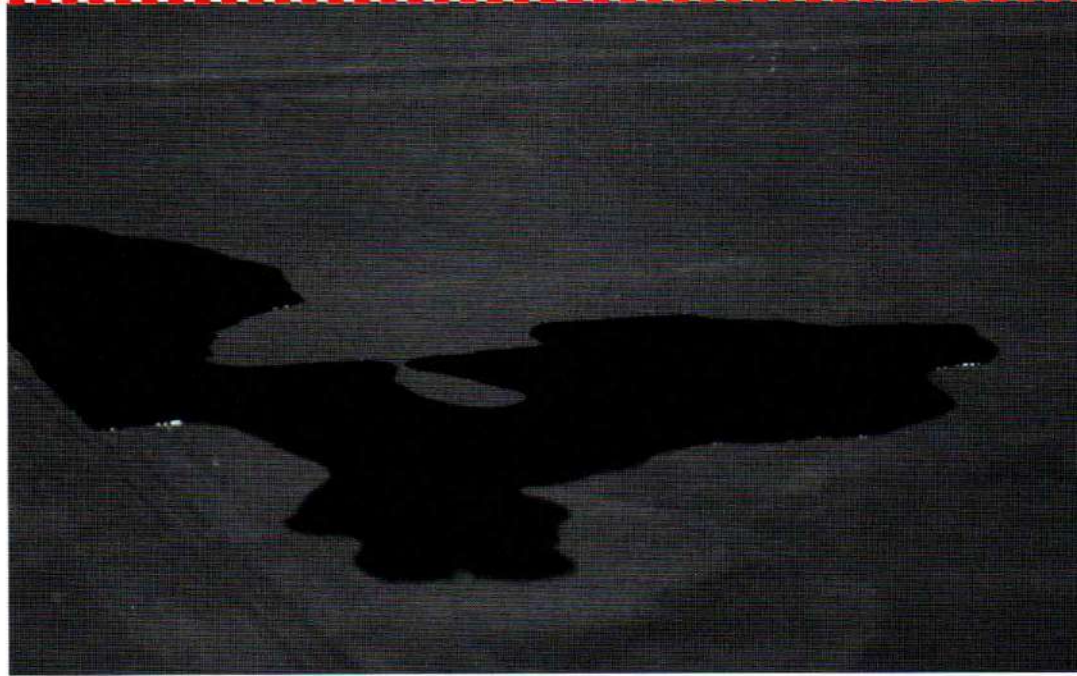
I don't think that this is merely a matter of aesthetic strategy. I think that the truth in this observation holds for any similar aesthetic effort. The ambivalent, even the paradox, and the metaphysical are so closely linked that one can not aim at the first without welcoming the second. David has so far been going about it in two ways: Firstly, his approach is one of reduction, which is to say that he is taking away all that seems superfluous in order to open our view on the things themselves, on their essence, if there is such a thing. Secondly, he seems to be aiming at ambivalence. Or, if he isn't aiming at it, he does not avoid it but embraces and welcomes it as vital to his enterprise.

'Ambivalence' and the 'impossible' were also key notions in the conception and staging of *This Performance*. *This Performance* posed the

question of the true location of theatre: Is it on stage or is it in the audience's heads? Owing largely to the influence of visual artist Benoit Goupy who cooperated on *This Performance*, the production displayed a strong sense of intentionality and careful, dedicated design – from the running of the water to the rhythm of the light fades in the first part of the performance, to the minimal movements of the solo performer, Jennifer Minetti, in the second part. *This Performance* presented a perfectly designed world in a limited space, yet at the same time it opened this space towards the realm of imagination. Everything was there yet nothing happened. The performance was aiming at the paradox of fullness and emptiness, movement and stasis combined in one spatial-temporal setting.

Quite naturally, the success of this effort varied from one audience member to the next. Some people have listened to the narration of a divine battle, some saw water drip. Some felt free to let their imagination travel, some felt constrained by the words of the anonymous voice. In Minetti's performance, some saw the essence of human life and struggle (in fast motion), some saw a clown. While most of this can be said of theatre in general, *This Performance* made a specific attempt in aiming at these diverging reactions. By reducing the elements on stage, it opened up the space to numerous and possibly contradictory images. While the first half of the performance works as a catalyst for the audience's projections and expectations, the second half with the performer appearing on stage turns this movement around. Now it is the performer's task to give to the audience: to meet their expectations and act them out or otherwise to fail miserably. Yet Minetti does neither. Instead she guards the ambivalence. Instead of enacting the expectations, she enacts the impossibility of enacting! She does not of course simply refuse to perform – after all, that would be impossible – she performs in a very distinctive and defined way. But the essence of her performance is ambivalence.

It is this quality in Minetti's performance, that I find to be an aesthetic key to the paradox of metaphysical experience. Metaphysical experiences are not only individually varied, as mentioned before, they are also quite ambivalent. And how could they not be? All we know, all we can relate to must come from the material realm, must be part of our earthly experience. So if there is another realm, how can we experience it? Since to experience means to compare, to put into context and perspective. Maybe the metaphysical expe-



rience can thus be described as that which can never be fully integrated – a rebellious residue?

Religion, as was also mentioned before, can be seen as an effort in contextualising the metaphysical experience. And religion plays no little part in David's artistic efforts including *This Performance*. Yet I would argue that his aesthetic proposition is not a religious one. Religion, like all conditioning and unifying enterprises, can not accept ambivalence. If it does keep traits of ambivalence it dissolves them in the mysterious. But mystery and ambivalence are not the same, rather mystery is an objectification of ambivalence. (Everyone can create and experience ambivalences but who of us can create a mystery?) Yet while ambivalences deter institutions and collectives, the human individual seems to be able to stand and even enjoy the experience of ambivalence. I would suspect that it is something genuinely human to accept that rebellious residue for what it is.

So in opposition to what I would call a religious approach, should we call David's a rebellious approach? It is certainly one of embracing ambivalence. Aiming at the material in its most basic form in order to hit at the meta-material – or enacting the impossibility of enacting for that matter – sounds paradox enough. Yet by letting these oppositions coexist within a single artistic creation instead of trying to merge them, I believe that it is possible to incite a sense not only of the metaphysical, but more importantly, of our rela-

tionship to it. Instead of creating pictures of the metaphysical, the aim is to formulate questions about our vision; instead of pointing towards the sky, the aim is to loosen our bond to the ground. Acknowledging ambivalence means accepting its request to continuous questioning without answers, a request to decision making, with decisions that are impossible to make. It's neither nor, yet it's a proof of free will and of the ability to go beyond natural limits – at least in thought. Not dissolving ambivalences in dichotomies or mysteries might after all well be what makes us human. And as for art – what more could art be than a continuous questioning, a continuous movement towards the unsolvable?

Henry Miller – a rebellious artist who felt right at home in the continuous flux between material grounds and spiritual heights – tells the following anecdote on the first pages of one of his last books. Discussing a painting by Hieronymus Bosch with a friend, he remarks that the oranges in Bosch's painting were 'so preternaturally real in appearance'. He asks how it came that they '*possessed something more than would oranges painted, say, by Cézanne or even by van Gogh. To Jack it was simple. (Everything is quite simple to Jack, by the way. It's part of his charm.) Said Jack: 'It's because of the ambiance.' And he is right, absolutely right.*' ■