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A Review Essay: Rendering "Staging Wittgenstein"

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Performance review: *Staging Wittgenstein*

Jerry H. Labowitz Theatre for the Performing Arts, NYU Gallatin, New York City

June 13 through 14, 2017

Creator and Director: Blair Simmons

Performers: Nikita Lebedev and Annie Hägg

Dramaturge: Nikita Lebedev

Photos courtesy of Ella Barnes

***STEP #1:** Be sure to wear eye/face protection. Handle balloon with care. Clean hands of dirt and remove sharp objects from inflation area.¹*

***STEP #2:** Make sure to have 2 people for operation. 1st person holds neck of balloon over regulator. 2nd person holds body of balloon.²*

***STEP #3:** Be sure to leave balloons by sharp objects. Instructions must be brought to the attention of the instructions. Clean hands with dirt. Be sure to remove your neck, hands and body before testing. Be sure.³*



Photo by Ella Barnes

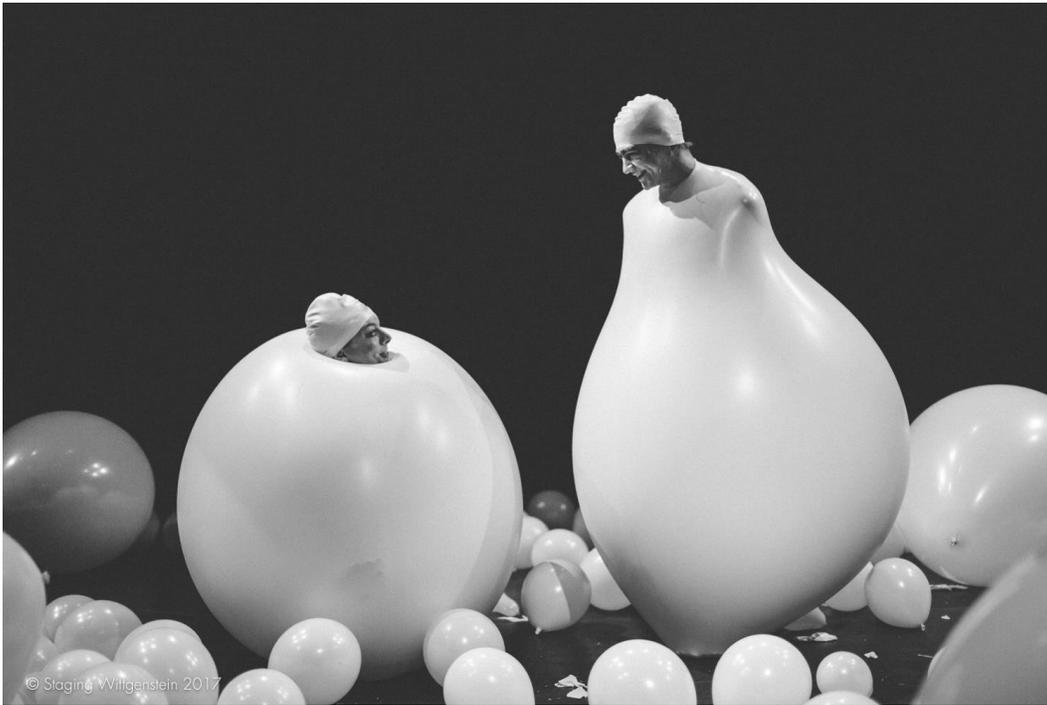


Photo by Ella Barnes

In Blair Simmons' performance *Staging Wittgenstein*, the playing space is a language laboratory. A dramatic interpretation of Ludwig Wittgenstein's seminal text *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*,⁴ *Staging Wittgenstein* displaces philosophy from a text-based medium into the live and relational, space- and time-based medium of performance. By staging theory, the performance gives new meaning to Wittgenstein's "language game."⁵

Published in 1922, the *Tractatus* changed the face of analytic philosophy. The text asserts that language and reality share a common structure and that the world can be faithfully represented by a logical use of language. But for all its representational power, this logical language leaves unsayable all of the important issues of ethics and aesthetics that make up much of human thought, because these are speculative issues that don't have definite right or wrong answers. In this way, the *Tractatus* unravels the basis for its own contributions, because as a work that grapples with the speculative issues of language and reality, the *Tractatus* itself cannot be expressed in Wittgenstein's logic of incontrovertibly true facts. In investigating what can and cannot be articulated in a

language with these specific syntactical rules, the *Tractatus* comes to a conclusion of its own meaninglessness, effectually calling for its disposal by the book's end.

STEP #4: Make a rational, sequential list of instructions. Instructions must be perfectly logical and express true facts about the object(s) of your instruction. Instructions are propositions that express facts about the world. Instructions must be followed in order: completing proposition one is necessary to get to proposition two. When all propositions are completed, instructions may be discarded.

The world of *Staging Wittgenstein* involves two performers, and many white balloons of varying sizes. Wearing giant inflated balloons like a costume, the performers Annie Hägg and Nikita Lebedev become "balloon people," and enter into a world that enacts Wittgenstein's theory. The balloons function as a metaphor for the encapsulation of meaning within the confines of language, and the performers' relationship to language follows a strange but distinct logic as they grapple with, and eventually escape their balloon-bodies. Inside the balloons, the performers communicate with a physical vocabulary: as one of them stands inside the balloon, growing and stretching upwards, the other seems to be pulled down from below, their face squished against the sphere of latex.

Rather than being structured by a strict script, the arc of *Staging Wittgenstein* is determined by the actors' interactions with the rules and logics of the performance world. In this way, it is more of a staged game than a traditional theater performance. Like a game, a different narrative is constructed each time it is performed, albeit from the same theatrical elements and structures. One of the most constraining performance parameters is the balloons' propensity to pop, very loudly, at any moment, to the serious alarm of the audience. After the first inevitable pop, the balloons become ticking bombs, with a vitality and agency of their own that provokes a distinct anxiety in the audience. This discomfort is continuously gauged—intensified and released—by the two performers' careful and deft execution of their own particular slapstick comedy. The audience peals with laughter when Hägg and Lebedev attempt to move across the stage in their balloons

by hopping around, in the stunted, alien manner that their body-balloon apparatus affords them.

The most theatrically affective, breathtaking moment of the piece is when Hägg unexpectedly stands inside her balloon, stretching it to the bulbous, oblong shape depicted in the left-hand figure below. She pulls the opening of the balloon away from her neck, allowing the air to escape quickly; the escaping air fans her hair away from her face and suddenly her human figure is revealed, looking vacuum-sealed inside the taut, deflated balloon. The audience, raucous before this moment, is silent and enrapt. At this moment Hägg delivers a short monologue in a strange kind of nonsense English, her words strung together in a poetry that denies sense and coherency:

Release as slow as possible as long as possible can be slow releasing. As long as slow as possible. As releasing as possible. To be slow is to be possible. Handle dirt and sharp objects with care. It is possible to dirt at high speed while being bird. Starting to follow all instructions is to prolong a small bird breeze, small bird breeze must prolong.⁶

Hägg's delivery is plain, and the candor with which she speaks the cryptic monologue, with its unfamiliar use of familiar words, feels absurd and profound.



Photos by Ella Barnes

Once Lebedev's balloon pops, exposing his human body clad in nondescript black spandex, he is shocked to discover that he can only communicate in a vocabulary of guttural vocalizations, grunts, and squeaks. There is a moment before Hägg's deflated balloon breaks around her, when they actually cannot understand each other—presumably because they occupy different linguistic worlds. When Lebedev, liberated from his balloon, tries to communicate with Hägg, she can only repeat, "Instructions? Instructions?"⁷ looking puzzled and concerned. But once Hägg's balloon breaks, they become fluent in the same language again, developing a strange new vocabulary of non-words and phatic utterances, which seem closer to music than spoken word.

Although this language is ostensibly further from the one shared by the audience, it is paradoxically more intelligible than the fragmented sentences of scrambled English words. Now that they are outside of the balloons, they find new channels of communication in their articulable limbs, subtle vocal inflection, and the timing/delivery of their "lines." For the first time, an explicit narrative develops between Hägg and Lebedev's "characters." A phone rings, the sound effect courtesy of Lebedev himself, and when he answers, he gives the impression that he is talking to a parent; indeed, the only vaguely intelligible "word" in this sequence is a whiney "Moooooom." Lebedev insists that Hägg take the phone from him, but it is clear that she wants nothing to do with it—suddenly, they are bickering siblings. This whole sequence is executed with a masterful comedic delivery that has the audience in stitches. Not only is their playful quarrel hilarious, but also the apparent ease with which the audience can make meaning from their vocal trills and squeals is astonishing.

***STEP #5:** One or more persons other than the author of the instructions must complete the instructions. Those completing the instructions may have no help from the author in interpreting them. Document the person completing the instructions.*

The language game of *Staging Wittgenstein* enacts Wittgenstein's phrase, "the limits of language mean the limits of [our] world." But what exactly does it mean to enact theory? Natasha Myers' concept of a *rendering* is helpful in considering how theoretical abstraction can be modeled or enacted through a kind of material analogy. Myers asserts

that the act of rendering is inherently performative in that a rendering not only represents or describes its original object; rather, it actually materializes a world that is constituted by its object. For instance, in her book *Rendering Life Molecular*, Myers argues that the scientific process of making molecular models actually renders life itself molecular, instead of just the other way around.⁸ Usually, it is assumed that scientists make molecular models because the world is itself already molecular. By this logic, the computer renderings of molecules are merely a description, or representation, of the “real” molecules that make up the world. In contrast, Myers says that the rendering, and the “real thing,” are mutually constitutive: because scientists make molecular models, we understand the world as molecular.⁹

Adopting this logic, the practice of enacting theory does more than just create a live, performative demonstration or representation of a text: rather, it *renders* the text. *Staging Wittgenstein* is a rendering of the *Tractatus* because it enacts the syntactical rules of the original text, interpreting, translating, and refracting them through the medium of the performers’ bodies and their relation in space. As a rendering of the *Tractatus*, *Staging Wittgenstein* actually materializes a world of linguistic logics, rather than just representing them.

Why is it important that *Staging Wittgenstein* makes this leap from representation and description to enactment, rendering, and world-making? Karen Barad advocates for a “performative alternative to representationalism [that] shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality... to matters of practices/doings/actions.”¹⁰ One of the fundamental assumptions of the *Tractatus* is the correspondence between descriptions, or language, and reality. Rendering this text as a practice/doing/action can be read as a productive negation, or critique, of that fundamental assumption of the text. When the audience laughs at Hägg and Lebedev’s balloon-based language, they prove the mutability and flexibility of what we call language. In communicating with an absurd and inflatable vocabulary, the very notion of language is perturbed. In jesting Wittgenstein’s logics, the performance shifts the notion of language from the correspondence between description and reality, to a notion of language as theatricality, in which meaning is fleeting, relative, and made anew in

every instance of communication. Thus, through comedy, physical theater, and word play, *Staging Wittgenstein* itself becomes a theoretical argument against its source text.

Finally, what kind of subsequent rendering is enacted when a performance is reviewed? Considering the project of *Staging Wittgenstein* as an iterative process that started with a text, the *Tractatus*, morphed into the medium of performance, and then is rendered linguistic again through various artifactual reviews and performance-writings, it is possible to understand this history as a series of transformations that perform renderings on each other. In this way, performance writing is never simply “about” a performance—it acts on the performance by rendering it linguistic, just as *Staging Wittgenstein* acts on the *Tractatus* by rendering it live and corporeal. Thus reimagining the review as an “acting-on” instead of a “writing-about,” as a doing more than a description:

STEP #6: Write about this process of interpretation. Describe the way the interpreter completed the instructions, and how their interpretation is different from the instructions themselves. Write new instructions that describe how to enact the whole process of writing and enacting instructions. Give away, or discard, all instructions.

¹ Blair Simmons, *Staging Wittgenstein* (unpublished manuscript, May 2016), 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein and Charles Kay Ogden, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. London: Routledge, 2005.

⁵ Anat Biletzki and Anat Matar, “Ludwig Wittgenstein.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. November 08, 2002. Accessed September 12, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein/#Lan>.

⁶ Simmons, 2.

⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸ Natasha Myers, *Rendering Life Molecular*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015. 124.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 802. doi:10.14361/9783839403365-008.