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Death and the anthropomorphic life of objects in performance

Marina Abramović's *Nude with Skeleton* and other animations

JUNGMIN SONG

The Budapest-born theatre maker Gyula Molnár, in his 1984 work *Small Suicides (Three Brief Exorcisms of Everyday Use)*, is attributed with creating a new form of theatre and performance: object theatre (Williams 2014). This seminal work, which has been performed many times by its creator and re-done by international artists, anthropomorphizes quotidian things and injects personality and life into ordinary household possessions.

I saw a segment of Molnár's trilogy re-done in 2008 by British puppeteer Sean Myatt at the 'Theatre Material/Material Theatres' conference at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London: the famous 'Alka-Seltzer' tableau. This tabletop piece 'tells the tale of the sad bullying of an Alka-Seltzer by a group of sweets and its ultimate suicide in a glass of water' (Myatt 2009: 38). Bullied and isolated by sweets in bright-coloured wrappers, the white naked tablet drowns itself. Its body dissolves into water, releasing bubbles. The subtitle of the show 'Three Brief Exorcisms of Everyday Use' suggests that Molnár sees that objects are possessed by usage, and the 'Small Suicides' enacted are rites of exorcism from usefulness. We would usually put an Alka-Seltzer tablet into a glass of water and take the solution to relieve ourselves from aches and discomfort. That, at least, is what the tablets are manufactured for. Through Molnár's anthropomorphic acts we read a tablet dissolving in water as an effervescent death of the protagonist in a pool of water – a tragic act that relieves our hero from the unbearable pain of life's cruelty. We momentarily put aside the Alka-Seltzer's primordial identity as an antacid and pain-relief tablet to empathize with a character's human despair.

The self-identity of things in such formative acts of object performance snaps into theoretical focus through the work of German philosopher Martin Heidegger. In contrast with Molnár, who consider objects to be possessed by everyday usage, Heidegger sees 'usability' as the ontological foundation of the thing (Heidegger 2008: 99). Things programme our actions with them. 'When we deal with them by using them and manipulating them, this activity is not a blind one; it has its own kind of sight, by which our manipulation is guided and from which it acquires its specific Thingly character' (98).

Heidegger analyzes different modes of encountering objects. One can use a thing and experience its 'readiness-to-hand', losing conscious recognition of the equipment in use. Both thing and user disappear in moments of pure usage. There is no me, no tool, only the action of using remains (Harman 2009). In contrast, in the mode of 'presence-at-hand', we cease unreflectively using a thing: we step back and consciously analyze, theorize and interpret. This sort of encounter is sparked by specific contingencies, such as when a tool breaks down and becomes an obstruction for its user. In everyday use readiness-to-hand is much more characteristic than presence-at-hand, and constitutes a defining feature of 'everyday objects'.

But objects are not inherently characterized by 'readiness-to-hand' or 'presence-at-hand'. In their manipulation and usage, they slip back and forth from one mode to the other and even operate in both modes simultaneously. We are not just tool users, and tools are not just there to be used. We think about our

actions as we perform them. Things, even in use, are considered actively in terms of design, aesthetics, symbolic properties and sentimental values. There is a complex and entangled interaction between humans and objects. I would argue, following Schechner (2013), that any strip of behaviour or object can be potentially considered 'as' performance (38–42): there can be no purely everyday, non-reflexive moment.

The performance of animating objects emerges when objects in consort with performers become a field of phenomena in the perception of an audience. Object theatre of the sort practiced by Molnár brings everyday objects before audiences to open up potentials beyond utility. We take in an object's duality, both its function in our everyday lives and transformed symbolic identity in performance. In this cultural arena, an object's identity as a hand tool is still intact even as an object is endowed with heightened presence through the hands of performers and apperception of spectators.

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ'S NUDE WITH SKELETON AND THE CERTAINTY OF DEATH

Animation involves a constantly shifting relation between subject and object. This was recognized by Czech semiotician Jiří Veltruský as early as 1940 in his 'Man and Object in the Theater' (1964). Veltruský speaks of a 'dialectic antinomy' between performer and object, with both having different degrees of 'activeness' (90). Performance art audiences are accustomed to the artist's body as the central if not sole focus of attention. This emphasis has the consequence that non-human actants (Latour 2007) have often been neglected and pushed to the periphery. Objects might be used, but are not perceived, as active. In fact, since at least the 1970s, body-centred performance art associated with Stelarc, Chris Burden and Marina Abramović has been referred to interchangeably as Body Art. This work brings into focus the artist's biography and questions in an anti-Cartesian mode 'what happens to the



body and mind when thinking is a secondary' (Phelan 2004: 17).

Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović's retrospective *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* was held at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 2010. Along with a new three-month-long performance piece *The Artist is Present*, over fifty works spanning over forty years of her career were exhibited. Five of these historical works were re-performed live by a group of performers she called 'young artists', alongside documentation of the original performances by the artist. In an interview she gave prior to the opening of the MoMA retrospective, Abramović insisted that

to be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. Theatre is fake ... The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real. (Ayers 2010)

'Hate' is a strong word, and so is 'fake', especially when it is aimed at artists aspiring to genuineness and uniqueness. It is no wonder that theatre practitioners and critics found her comments offensive (see Wilkinson 2010). Ironically, not long after Abramović's statement was published, she staged her own (fake) funeral in a collaboration with the leading American theatre director Robert Wilson in *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović* (Manchester International Festival 2011). Even more perplexing for me than Abramović's theatrical turn was her performance video *Nude with Skeleton* exhibited at MoMA. The video, 12 minutes and 36 seconds long, was played on a loop alongside a 'young artist' performing it live in long durations. In the video, Abramović

■ *Small Suicides (Three Brief Exorcisms of Everyday Use)*
by Gyula Molnár.
Photo Ilaria Scarpa

is lying down, animating a skeleton stacked on her naked body. Abramović accentuates her breathing, and this is amplified by the skeleton, with its limbs limply draping her body. The skeleton rises and falls with the movements of her ribcage and stomach. The skeleton was constructed to be the size of Abramović's own, symbolizing her death. A main feature of one of the key works in *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, the very exhibition she was promoting through the interview cited above, is a 'fake' skeleton. How could she insist that you 'have to' hate fakery to be a performance artist while including an object that is obviously fake? If a knife in theatre is a fake because it is too blunt to lacerate skin, if blood is fake because it didn't ooze from a cut on skin, how is it that a model of a skeleton never enclosed by real flesh might be qualified as real?

To Abramović, *Nude with Skeleton* 'is really about facing your own mortality. It is about fear of pain and fear of dying. Something that in our life we fear the most' (MoMA Multimedia: No Date). Skeletons are both relics of life and an anthropomorphism of death; they have usability in that they give death a visible, humanly contour as memento mori. Abramović uses a fake skeleton of her own size made of non-organic material to symbolize her own death, present at hand. The skeleton is a symbolic object, an artificially produced representation of death, which doesn't have its origin in Abramović's death. It is not a copy of death's form; death is an abstract idea that does not have a form that can be copied. Death can never be faked in material form, as it does not exist.

Abramović's earlier performances are more transcendent towards death (Westcott 2010). There were seventy-two real objects, including a real rose, needles, a hammer and a loaded gun, in Abramović's *Rhythm 0*, originally performed in 1974. While she was standing still for 6 hours, the audience was invited to do whatever they would like to do to her with objects ready to hand on a table. When a visitor aimed a 'useful' loaded gun at her, the performance was halted by audience action. Her real body

bled as she cracked herself with a real whip in *Lips of Thomas* from 1975. The 700 cow bones in *Balkan Baroque* she cleaned for four days in the Venice Biennale of 1997 were also real and rotting in the stale atmosphere of a basement. In *Rhythm 5* from 1974, her 'real' body lost consciousness after inhaling excessive amount of carbon dioxide released from the flames of wood shavings soaked in gasoline. In these performances, the body was brought to the border between life and death. Through carrying out acts that test bodily limits, enduring extreme durations, laceration and self-inflicted pain, we see not only an artist's body nearing death, but recognize the obdurate quality of life. Many of Abramović's works, including those performed in collaboration with Ulay, have explored acute physical pain, and some touched on the elusive horizon separating life from death.

'Real' objects in Abramović's early work were active agents that transported the artist and spectators to border states between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness. Transcendence occurred in her performances' intricate networks of objects and humans. A loaded gun disrupted the performance when it threatened the artist's life. The beef bones in *Balkan Baroque* decayed over the performance's duration and the stench caused physical discomfort. The way in which *Nude with Skeleton* unfolds is not in line with those performances. The inorganic skeleton cannot decay like the real cow bones in *Balkan Baroque*. The performance is controlled, the performance object's activity given short shrift, and the border between the live body and dead object untroubled.

While the skeleton can be read as a doubling or amplification of Abramović's presence, it is also possible to understand it as a prototypical example of what Frank Proschan calls 'performing objects', 'material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance' (1983: 4). Skeleton puppets are found worldwide and when Abramović describes *Nude with Skeleton*, she

unknowingly evokes some of puppetry's core principles. This is how Abramović explains the movement of the skeleton: 'By breathing slowly [the] skeleton gets animated and moves together with me' (MoMa Multimedia, No Date). Respiration is a crucial process for any living beings to sustain life. 'Breathing life into something' metaphorically means giving things vitality. In puppetry simulating breathing in the bodies of non-living objects is an effective way of giving them a sense of life. Anthropomorphism typically is taken to involve 'projections of human physical features' (Boyer 1996: 91). Here a dynamic rather than a static attribute is a primary signifier of the human.

Breath is the key principle for animation in the practice of South Africa's influential Handspring Puppet Company.¹ Their intricate puppets, often controlled by two or more puppeteers, are constructed to mediate and externalize the breath of their animators. These puppets are often built to have a flexible ribcage in order to portray breath mimetically. But breath's importance goes beyond mere mimicry. As the company's co-director Adrian Kohler says, breath 'is the origin of all our movement; it is the source' (cited in Sichel 2009: 166). Through coordinating this small movement, the puppeteers are able to work in synchrony as a unit. Breath keeps the figures alive for the audience and brings unity to the team of animators. As soon as the puppet stops breathing, in Handspring's work, the puppet dies.

Abramović, in contrast, exaggerates and slows down the expansion and contraction of her chest in *Nude with Skeleton* in order to heighten the aliveness of her naked body braced against her theatricalized double, the skeleton. Her action generates the opposite effect of that desired by most puppeteers, who breathe life into objects so that the manipulated puppets become the central focus for an audience in dialectic antinomy. But underlying the work is a tantric source that posits a much more nebulous threshold between life and death, the body and its remains.

ROLANG, THE CORPSE WHO STANDS UP, AND THE UNCERTAINTY OF DEATH

The MoMA multimedia website developed to accompany Abramović's solo exhibit explains that

one of the influences on Abramović's work is Tibetan Buddhism. In *Nude with Skeleton* Abramović evokes traditional exercise undertaken by Tibetan monks during which they sleep along side the dead in various states of decay. Through the practice they gain an understanding of process of death.
(MoMA Multimedia, No Date)

This description struck me as problematic from first reading. A decaying corpse is an object in process, replete with its own inhuman 'life'. The corpse is in flux – and in this sense the dead body is 'alive'. A monk sleeping with a corpse would not understand human death any better, but rather would be experiencing the life of a corpse as actant.

An earlier version of *Nude with Skeleton* was exhibited in Abramović's retrospective at the Oxford Museum of Modern Art. This work, a video installation titled *Cleaning the Mirror II* (1995), differs from *Nude with Skeleton* in that rather than showing a full shot of the artist's naked body with a skeleton the camera closely frames Abramović's face and the adjacent skull. Thus we see the expression of her face and the rolling movements of the skull in detail. In her authorized biography (Westcott 2010), Abramović reports drawing her inspiration for *Cleaning the Mirror II* from an account of a Tibetan *rolang* rite in *Mystics and Magicians in Tibet*, a travel book by Alexandra David-Neel published in 1929 that is still considered a valuable source on religions of Tibet (David-Neel 1997).

Abramović was inspired specifically by a rite related to *rolang* that David-Neel heard described by a Tibetan sorcerer. The *rolang*, sometimes translated as 'risen corpse', 'the corpse who stands up' or 'zombie', is a well-known supernatural figure in popular Tibetan belief that can cause harm to the living if not carefully monitored and controlled (Wylie 1964). The rite described by David-Neel

¹ See *Breathing Puppets* on the National Theatre's YouTube channel (National Theatre Discover, 2011, <http://youtu.be/AiFGATFzgFU>, 13 June, accessed 7 October 2014) on the importance of breathing in Handspring's collaboration with the National Theatre, *Or You Could Kiss Me* (2011).

was a means for the necromancer to obtain supernatural power. The occult celebrant was incarcerated in a dark room with a corpse. He lay down on top of the corpse, holding it tight, and breathed into its mouth, as if to blow life into the dead. The story goes that after a while the corpse began to move, first slowly and then tried to escape the sorcerer's grasp ferociously. The sorcerer had to hang onto it by keeping his mouth locked to the corpse's until the moment it protruded its tongue. At that moment, he bit off the tongue. He dried and kept the tongue as a powerful magic weapon to be made use of (David-Neel 1997).

Tibetan expert Turrell Wylie (1964) traces this sort of rite as far back as Taranatha's *History of Buddhism in India*, dating from 1608. In this text, a sorcerer is assisted by a Buddhist monk to reanimate a corpse. Wylie also describes at length another sort of Tibetan zombie that he calls a demonic *rolang*. These zombies are the remains of humans possessed by evil spirits. These malevolent beings roam the countryside trying to create more *rolangs* by placing their palms on the heads of victims.

In reading these Tibetan sources I encountered another perplexing fact. The description of Abramović's video piece on the MoMA multimedia website designates the rite as a 'Buddhist' practice. But Wylie describes these sorts of practices as tantric and manifestations of popular religious belief, while David-Neel clearly asserts that 'I need not say that this repugnant mysticism has nothing at all in common with Buddhism. It is also foreign to true Lamaism, though a few Lamas secretly yield to its bizarre attraction' (1997: 124). David-Neel is also suspicious of her sorcerer's claim that he had actually conducted the rite of the *rolang*. She was doubtful that a black lump he brought out to show her was a tongue from a dead body.

It is ethically questionable for MoMA and Abramović, with their authoritative status in the art world, to misrepresent a rite from a distant culture. On the other hand, the wide discrepancy in conception of living and dead between Abramović and the Tibetans provides a useful platform to broaden views to death.

While Abramović states that *Nude with Skeleton* represents fear of death the Tibetans are not afraid of death *per se*. Rather they fear the demons that activate corpses to harm the living and the possibility that if the sorcerer failed in his occult bid for power, the tantric *rolang* might escape and lay waste to the countryside. There is no indication in Tibetan sources that practices related to *rolang* are a means for Buddhist monks to 'get familiar with death'.

Abramović took only loose inspiration for *Nude with Skeleton* from the basic physical structure of the first phase of the *rolang* rite as described by David-Neel – two bodies, one living and one dead, stacked on top of one another, one breathing into the other. That is where the similarity ends. For Abramović death is certain and absolute. It is also her own mortality that is certain, and a destiny she fears. She has no fear that her mortality might get up and walk around. Abramović lies beneath, not on top of, the skeleton. Unlike the Tibetan sorcerer fearing harm from the reanimated corpse, she does not grasp the skeleton closely to prevent it from attacking or escaping. For Abramović dead is dead for good, while the sorcerer aims to reactivate the corpse as a *rolang*. The conception of *Nude with Skeleton* has a close affinity to what Heidegger calls being-towards-death (2008). Heidegger advocates that to become an authentic self it is essential to acknowledge one's own mortality and temporal existence. Abramović's heavily breathing, naked body obtains greater presence underneath the lifeless symbolization of her own mortality.

Abramović's *Nude with Skeleton* doesn't convey the urgency and physical struggle I sense in David-Neel's original story. The grappling of the Tibetan sorcerer with the *rolang* has affinity with one of Abramović's earlier works that she created with her former partner Ulay in Belgrade, *Breathing In/Breathing Out* (1977). This piece shows the detrimental effects of two living bodies breathing into each other. It began as Abramović emptied her lungs and Ulay filled his. With their noses blocked, they locked their mouths together, breathing in from the air of the other's lungs and out into the other's

lungs. Because of the carbon dioxide built up in the air that was circulated in their breath, they collapsed within 20 minutes (Westcott 2010).

In *Breathing In/Breathing Out* we see that 'breathing into someone' does not physically bring one into life. Abramović and Ulay do not breathe life into each other; they use each other, they poison each other's bodies with their breath and transport each other to unconsciousness and the verge of death. Their act, paradoxically, illuminates their shared quality of life and grants power to this performance as 'live' artwork. This is not 'liveness' or the simulation of life (Auslander 1999); rather life itself that is being evoked through its near-extinction. In this piece, Ulay occupies a place on par with Abramović. They have a mutuality, a reciprocity, that is not so different from the relation that Abramović has with the real objects in her solo pieces *Rhythm 0*, *Rhythm 5*, *Lips of Thomas* and *Balkan Baroque*. I do not mean to imply that Ulay is Abramović's object, nor is he the subject of this piece. The two performers face each other, but are not antinomic. They are bound to each other through the circulation of air: two proximate bodies connected by one respiratory system driven to the brink of death.

CODA: DEATH IS CERTAIN?

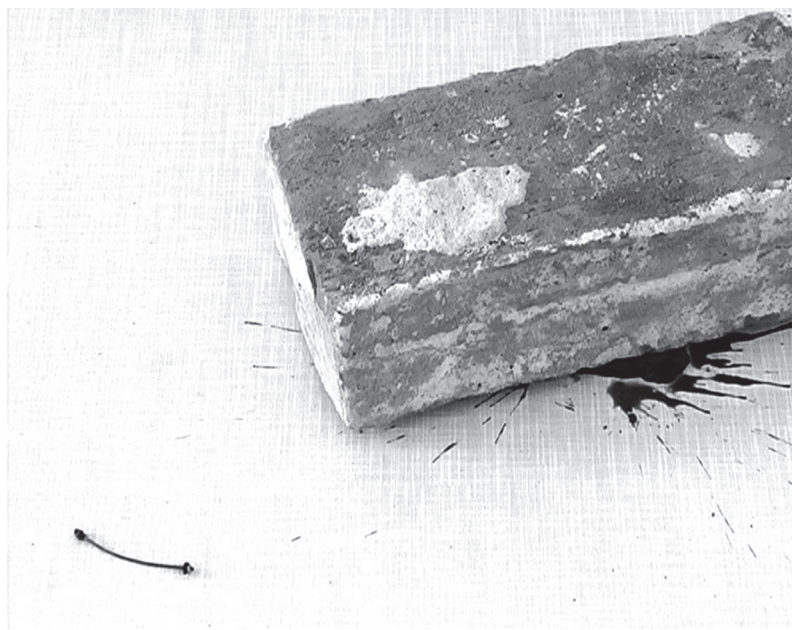
Life and death are not absolutes, but narrative functions that allow us to speculate on, recognize and announce who we are as humans in relation to the non-human world of objects. One might take the sorcerer's reanimation of a corpse as illusion, but we might, alternatively, after American philosopher Alphonso Lingis (2000), take this as a vision – a glimpse of our dialectical relation with objects.

Two works from Chinese artist Wang Yuyang's Breathing series, *Breathe – TV* (2013) and *Breathe – 'Big Brother' Cellular Phone* (2013), included in the 'Object of Fantasy' at Indigo Rooms in Somerset House in London in 2013, recreated discontinued television and phone models. Though made with flexible silica gel on metal frames, at first glance Wang's kinetic

sculptures look convincingly close to real out-of-date electronic devices. One only notices their artifice due to the continuous breathing motion of expansion and contraction of their motor-operated bodies. In fact, when I first walked into the exhibition room, I didn't notice any movement at all. I thought this was simply a display of objects no longer in use. Only when I returned to the room, did I sense something unusual going on. I walked closer to the objects and then noticed the discreet noise of breathing. Wang's objects don't take up any human- or animal-like features. But they come alive to the eyes and ears of viewers through their subtle breathing. That is enough to bring life to doubly dead objects.

Another object performance hovering at the border of object theatre and live art is conceptual dance artist Eva Meyer-Keller's *Death is Certain* (2002), which contains elements of anthropomorphizing without creating characters out of things. The performer, dressed in a white apron, destroys rows of red cherries with the tools of murder and execution. One cherry is crushed by a hammer, another injected by hands in rubber gloves, another crushed in a vice, another immolated in a pile of matches, another trapped in a plastic vessel and asphyxiated by cigarette smoke, another shaken around in a plastic cup lined with thumb tacks. It is impossible not to read this performance metaphorically. The cherries are surrogates for living beings, whether human or animal. The performer is the executioner, the audience the passive witnesses to a re-enactment of mass slaughter and genocide.

It is a harrowing performance and one that differs in important ways from Molnár's Alka-Seltzer sketch. Molnár provides a backstory to the suicide of his protagonist. He anthropomorphizes a tablet through a scene in which it is bullied by a group of sweets before it drowns itself in a glass of water. Without the bullying scene we would not read the performer dropping an Alka-Seltzer into water as a suicide. In contrast, Meyer-Keller's cherries are simply picked up from ordered rows on a table and transported one at a time to the site of killing.



■ *Death Is Certain.*
Video Still: Eva Meyer-Keller

The dramatic reality of the death is not due to the manipulation of the cherries. The pieces of fruit do not speak or move in human-like ways. Rather cherries are actants endowed with aliveness for the duration of their killing. The execution is carried out with care and attention to scale, materials and tools. That is what makes each death certain – the killing is performed correctly and precisely. As Meyer-Keller enacts execution, disaster and accident upon cherries, and their flesh is bashed, macerated, electrocuted or burnt, we ironically feel the life of cherries most acutely. And even after such brutal acts there is potential for another life, as from their pips a tree might spring. Death is only certain in the moment of killing, not eternally.

American puppet historian John Bell (1996: 50) describes the prevalence of relics of death such as bones and corpses in traditions worldwide. He writes that

The connection of relics to the dead world ... is their source of power, but practically speaking, this power can only be accessed by the simulation of life through the return of motion to the relic, through dance, procession, or in combination with other objects.... The return of the once-living to social, political, or spiritual functionality is momentary, but it plays across the border of death; we can bring back the body to the live world for some specific purpose. The 'point of contact' between live and dead worlds surfaces as a powerful link in performance.

Bell and other theorists of puppetry and object animation vehemently reject the belief that participating in the illusion of puppets

coming alive is naive, childish or primitive. It is not a delusion to place one's trust in the narrative of the genesis of the anthropomorphic life of objects. One sees 'what is not physically there in front of one's eyes' (Lingis 2000) in order to expand the web of connections that humans can have with our world.

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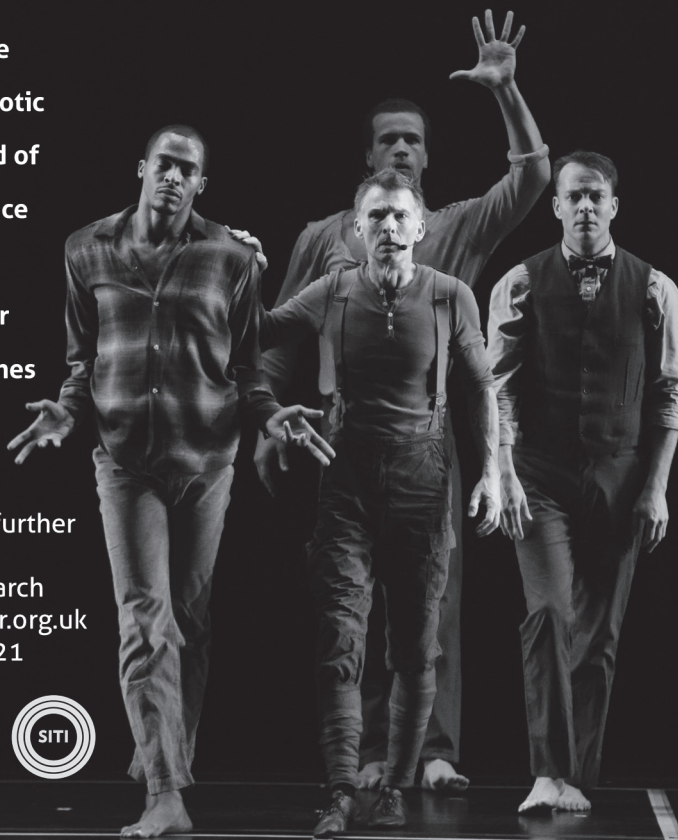


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