



Hybridity and Experimental Aesthetics in the Performances of Anne Imhof

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ABSTRACT

I consider that 'Hybridity' in performance is definable as, variously, the blurring and combining of traditional theatre, dance, music, art and 'everyday life' into single works; the trading of differences between 'high' and 'low' cultural registers; the merging together of seemingly inconsistent notions of time, space and identity, and the destabilization of audience identification and affective standpoints. Anne Imhof's hybridized performance is a fusion of media: painting, music and architecture, also known for its particular vocabulary of movement, its multi-layeredness, and incorporation of technology. There is an emphasis on the sensual and playful nature of the body, which, by experimental and technological means, is extended, reconfigured and yet identifiable as a locus of infinite variability. My paper will address theoretical sources before moving on to how these have manifested and been reciprocally reinterpreted by a variety of approaches in Imhof's realisation of her work *Sex* performed in the Tate Modern 'Tanks' in London 2019.

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In a press interview at Tate Modern,¹ Anne Imhof appeared far more accessible and affable than her public persona and her oeuvre suggest, in both of which an apparently strong aggressive, dark, disruptive force is presented. Dressed in black with thigh length black leather boots, she appeared to typify one of the luminaries of the Berlin art scene. Although originally from Frankfurt, she is now based in the capital with her partner, Eliza Douglas, and others of her ensemble of pale, lean, androgynous performers, variously involved in different performances at different times. All make creative and practical contributions to these collaborative works. She won the *Leone d'Oro* (Golden Lion) at the Venice Biennale 2017, representing Germany, with an installation/performance entitled *Faust*, combining painting, sound, sculpture, and physical theatre (humans and dogs). In the German Pavilion she and her company staged a depiction of a hard and defamiliarizing reality in which individuals were limited by physical, political, economic and technological restrictions, presented in a very visceral way. The very hardness of the physical elements, such as glass and steel, starkly evoked the corporate ambience of monied and powerful institutions, whilst cage-like structures implied a sinister atmosphere of control and restraint. These were populated by a scattering of discarded mobile technology, random paintings (mostly of, I think, Douglas), live flames and live Dobermans. The most important modification of the Pavilion's architecture was the addition of a transparent raised glass-floored platform, one metre over the pavement, which modified the relationship between the space, audience and performers allowing the latter to perform below the glass floor as well as in the same space as the audience whilst being continually under surveillance. The performance/installation was noted in a Biennale Review as being 'powerful and disturbing' (Günzel 2017).



Figure 1 *Faust*. Dir and Choreography: Anne Imhof. German Pavilion, Venice Biennale (May–November), 5 September 2017. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.



Figure 2 *Faust*. Dir and Choreography: Anne Imhof. German Pavilion, Venice Biennale (May–November), 5 September 2017. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

¹ Anne Imhof, interviewed during the Press Preview of *Sex* at the Tate Modern, 21 March (2019b).



Figure 3 *Faust*. Dir and Choreography: Anne Imhof. German Pavilion, Venice Biennale (May–November) 5 September 2017. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.



Figure 4 *Faust*. Dir and Choreography: Anne Imhof. German Pavilion, Venice Biennale (May–November), 5 September 2017. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

Other performances such as *Angst II* performed at the National Galerie, Berlin, in 2016b (following *Angst I* performed at the Kunsthalle, Basel, 2016a),² produced the same heady mixture of disparate elements intertwined with physical performance, including a fairly dangerous and threatening ambience, ‘ranging from hovering drones as a metaphor for terror on a world-political scale, to double-edged shaving razors as potential weapons of self-mutilation’ (Hugill 2016), thereby, providing an immersive total art experience.

² I attended both performances.

In March 2019, Imhof's Ensemble took over the fairly recently opened Performance Spaces (known as the Tanks, which is what they were originally) at Tate Modern, performing to sell-out audiences. Their four-hour durational performance, *Sex*, incorporated many of the above features. This time Imhof constructed her atmospheric environments within these spaces. For ten days and five nights, the ensemble filled them with performances that combined music, painting and choreographed gestures. During the day, Imhof's installation of paintings, sculptures and architectural interventions were there to be explored. In the ticketed evening events, the spaces came alive with music, lights and performance. In *Sex*, as in *Faust* and *Angst*, there was a mass charge of spectators, following the performers, determined not to miss a moment. Imhof incorporates such a dynamism into her work. This performance will be discussed in more detail below.

THEORETICAL PREMISE

My primary objective is to examine how various aesthetic features of recent and contemporary performance practices, such as Imhof's, notably 'hybridity' and 'totality', have their developmental origins in certain theoretical positions and performance practices. Performance has in recent times accreted popularity and new technological resources, but its relation to earlier theoretical positions, and their subsequent filtration into, and determination of matters of contemporary practice, remains largely obscure. I intend to provide some enlightenment here. My secondary objective is to address this lineage by examining and interrogating underlying theoretical and practical premises of such heterogeneous performance.

My analysis consists of four primary thematized strands, which follow lines of influence and citation:

- (1) 'Hybridity', the juxtaposition and superimposition of genres and cultural registers hitherto often considered incompatible.
- (2) 'Totality', the blending together of such different registers and resources so as to create multimedia and intermedial work. Totality has in the past been appropriated to the portrayal of the 'Total Artwork' (or following Richard Wagner: *Gesamtkunstwerk*, his own spelling), and is characterized nowadays as, in some respects, part (but certainly not all) of 'immersiveness'.

These two qualities could be seen respectively as the traces of two moments in the creative process of, and, importantly, overriding motifs in, Imhof's work. The quality of audience experience of works which demonstrate these features can be characterized by my next two strands.

- (3) 'Multi-layeredness', of simultaneous strata of technique and meaning within performances, which together tend to occlude any dominant narrative interpretation. This can be seen as the frequent experiential counterpart in works which exhibit (1) Hybridity. Multi-layeredness thus excludes a fixed, verbalizable, and predetermined authorial intention.
- (4) In this sense works that instantiate it can be said to be 'Experimental'. My fourth strand, which captures the intuition that with such works their effects are not subject to codified expectations nor are they shaped by clear authorial intentions, and indeed they are often not in an invariant form which is simply iterated in successive performances. They can have un-expected aesthetic outcomes. Not all works which evince the previous three qualities could be dubbed experimental, but when the blending of different registers, ranges of effect and hermeneutic standpoints is itself in constant flux from one performance to another, then this term can be validly applied.

'Hybridity' constitutes, I believe, a 'family resemblance concept', which is not governed by an 'intension', a closed set of predicates, each and every one of which must be applicable to each and every 'extension' or example. Instead, it consists of a loose set of intersecting properties none of which are universally applicable to all examples. This notion was first proposed by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1988: 31–2). In the case of hybridity these predications can be formalized as: the blurring and combining of traditional theatre, dance, music, art and 'everyday life' into single works; the trading of differences between 'high' and 'low' cultural registers; the ramming together of seemingly inconsistent notions of time, space and identity; the 'playing around' with audience identification and affective standpoints. A work

characterizable as hybrid may also evade secure classification within existing taxonomies of activity. As Jacques Derrida, writing on 'The Law of the Genre', asserts: 'every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text ... yet such participation never amounts to belonging' (1980: 211-2). This of course, correlates with the tendency of such hybridized practices to thwart expectations of conformity to the limits of any particular genre, and to continually transgress boundaries.

But hybridity can admit a sub-concept which connotes a different dimension of application. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of works, including Imhof's, not only in experimental performance venues but also in mainstream theatre spaces, which frequently exhibit what I term 'somatic hybridity' in their use of technology to extend the physical and sensual body into the virtual. Various experimental performances, in their use of technology, alter and reconfigure the physical and sensual body. I would argue that such habitual use of technology extends to our actual world, reconfiguring not only our physicality but also our experiential self. To have experience, to get used to an instrument, is to incorporate that instrument into the body; 'habit expresses our power of dilating our being in the world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 143). The experience of the corporal schema is not fixed or delimited but extendable to the various tools and technologies which may be embodied. This is not an especially novel insight: such 'in-corporation', to elucidate that word, is anticipated in Heidegger's concept of the 'ready-to-hand', whereby our tools and instruments cease to have objective presence and become our bodily extensions to realize our purposes (this is sometimes referred to in academic discourse as the 'Heidegger's hammer' syndrome (Heidegger 1978: 98)). Given the increasing employment of technology in all areas of performance, not only in esoteric performance but also in mainstream theatre, such a concept of somatic hybridity could prove crucial to future analyses. My conclusion briefly sketches a possible new aesthetic prospectus which it might developmentally imply.

'Totality' in the context of the Artwork is more neatly definable, though it raises the problem of its retrospective or anachronistic application by writers to characterize styles of different epochs, for example, by Nikolaus Pevsner with regard to the Baroque (1972: 250), by Matthew Wilson Smith (2007) updating the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in contemporary art practices, and by David Roberts (2011) demonstrating its pre-existent centrality in European culture since the French Revolution. It is also a concept that makes an implicit appeal to the nature and extent of the artist's creative intention and ambitions, raising the question of how closely autograph materials may elucidate these.

Early in his career, Wagner projected the '*Gesamtkunstwerk*' and, by it, conjectured an audience experience of being sensorily, affectively and spiritually overwhelmed by multi-media works, created to combine all their means into a vastly complex yet intrinsically unified effect that does not privilege any one of them. He also saw the 'totality' in his neologism as referring not only to the work itself but also the communal collaborations necessary for its production (Roberts 2011: 74). In my opinion, this totality should not be overstressed to the point of our occluding simultaneous perceptions of the plurality of means, and consequently ceasing to be aware that several media are involved. I call this limitation, 'intrinsic hybridity', in which there is a dynamic convergence of media that never quite becomes an indistinguishable fusion.

Hybridity and totality, in various ways, became archetypes for creative individuals now seen as Modernist initiators, particularly Antonin Artaud, who was responsible for the disruption of accepted performance practices and the introduction of new territories of response into what can be considered drama. He made explicit a general critique of logocentrism and rejected any sense of narrative direction or verbally conditioned interpretation, consequently theoretically licensing non-linear theatre. Eschewing any references to psychological or societal concerns, he saw theatre as 'organized anarchy', presenting cryptic signs 'to express objectively certain hidden truths' (Artaud 1958: 51-90). This, I argue, is the achieved standpoint of hermeneutic multi-layeredness.

Even Bertolt Brecht (though he would never have accepted such a lineage) can be seen as an inheritor of this expansion of dramatic potentialities. His *Verfremdungseffekt* ('defamiliarisation effect') posited a complication of audience response by advocating a drama which did not offer a represented world where it could 'take sides', but instead destabilized the security of reliable pathways of audience sympathy and identification with what they saw on stage. He

rejected the facile attempt at simulacrum in favour of a distanced, forever inconclusive, critical reflection. Paradoxically, this concomitant notion of 'epic theatre' presented, in its realisation, despite his very different purposes, something close to Wagnerian totality (Brecht 1964: 33–42).

'Multi-layeredness' stands in a conceptually 'polar' relation to hybridity, being difficult to define without invoking the latter. It serves to characterize the kind of presentation that hybridity 'scenically' produces. It too is familiar in structure; it contains such predictable features as: stylistic heterogeneity, indeterminacy, self-reflexiveness, fragmentation and 'non-iterative' repetitiveness. The perceptual experience in such works as those of Imhof's is characterized as that of 'multi-layeredness', which is related to aesthetic positions that underpin her 'experimental practice', which exemplify them.

In outlining some philosophical sources that have subsequently been invoked in contemporary discourse, which itself endeavours to modify aesthetic attitudes, Friedrich Nietzsche's theorisation on 'perspectival attitudes' removes from aesthetic response the need to conceive of the artwork as referring some world beyond itself. He therefore replaces a notion of artistic 'truth' with a practice of *écriture fragmentaire*, by which a 'plurality of perspectives' cannot be subdued to a dominant or definitive reading (Hartman 1970: 97–103). The 'will to art' can even be read as a fantastical 'flight from truth'. More radically, he attacks the idea of artistic content as cognitively detachable from the means of its presentation; such *écriture* is essentially reflexive, delighting in the play of language for its own sake, saying nothing outside itself. He enables the inception of heterogeneity (which falls under the concept of hybridity) as an aesthetic 'quality', and even anticipates interdisciplinary collaborations between arts and sciences in the composition of works. The biographical facts of his close association with, and initial enthusiasm for, Wagner also attest to his closeness to the realisation of the 'Total Artwork' (Nietzsche 2008). I argue that these two notions were lastingly injected into theorisation by him.

The mid-twentieth-century phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty enunciated a version of such absorption of the subject by what it encounters, in what could be called somatized empathy, in his later works dubbed 'the flesh of the world' (2000: 248). But he also made it a more deliberative and dynamic process: when the meaning aimed at cannot be reached by the body alone, it builds its own instruments and projects around itself a mediated world. And this of course brings us back to the notion of 'somatic hybridity', mentioned above, of which this somatized empathy is the experiential consequence. From such a notion he propounded (again, with Heidegger) the notion of the 'delimited body'. According to Merleau-Ponty: 'the body is our general medium for having a world' (1962: 146), extending itself into its instruments. I argue that such a model is key to understanding much of contemporary technological informed performances.

It is my belief that, notwithstanding, and rather because of, the differences and contrariety of their positions, these theorists extended the boundaries of the 'legitimately' theatrical in a way that was a necessary condition for the evolution of the contemporary hybridized performance tradition which is so central to the artworks of Imhof.

SEX, HYBRIDITY AND THE TOTAL ARTWORK

According to Imhof at the 2019 Press Preview of *Sex*, the title was chosen, following *Angst* and *Faust*, because it opened up associations to 'big ideas' and to both sex and violence (Imhof 2019b). In her conversation with Curator Catherine Wood, Imhof stated that:

I've thought about what could follow *Faust*. So *Sex* was the only title that holds that kind of promise for me, and to have a work that is strong enough and open enough for me to continue, to make a new work. The word *Sex* offered a way of relating to something that could not just describe but could stand for, a larger body of work. (Imhof and Wood 2019)

In *Sex* (2019a) there was a noticeable blurring between the audience and the performers. The two tanks that comprise the Tate Modern performance spaces mirror each other. The audience in the Western Tank was elevated on a pier looking out over the space and the performers were on the ground. In the Eastern Tank these positions were reversed with the performers looking down on the audience. It could be asserted that Imhof's predilection for such structures is a physical epiphenomenon and realization of multi-layeredness: audience and performers

encounter each other at different spatial layers, which leaves the activities of the latter strangely 'oblique', not intentionally presented 'to' an audience, who, though spatially involved in the totality of the event, are also reduced to being passing spectators at an anthropological activity which is not ostensibly 'for their benefit'. These structures also suggest that the performance has a strong reference to, and deconstruction of, notions of played out power and hierarchy. According to Imhof: 'I think certain hierarchies are inscribed in images ... Images built over time somehow ... have different layers, where you have to see that an image is not fixed'. She continues that what she was trying to present in the twin tanks is what happens at the same time but from 'different perspectives' (Imhof and Wood 2019).

Imhof's vivid, mostly monochrome, abstract paintings, architectural interventions, sculptures and various memorabilia (including a motorcycle helmet) were dispersed around the spaces creating her *mis en Scène*. These heterogenous objects, I would suggest, further layer her total and immersive environment with all the associations that they could evoke. They are, as it were, instruments of hybridity, making the officially 'public' gallery space one with private, even autobiographical connotations (perhaps a simpler attempt to do this can be seen in Tracey Emin's 'My Bed').

In describing the creative process of her group, Imhof recreates certain images; not everything is scripted, and each performer brings in their own ideas and gestures. This can involve the blending together of fragments of gesture and movement extrapolated from different pre-existing milieux of theatre and fashion. Explaining some of her character developments she mentions that, for instance, working with one of the performers – Josh Jackson – his figure is 'half dandy, half *flâneur*'. Continuing, she notes 'he enters over and over in scene, which is kind of a funny thing to do entering without purpose ... always switching positions', whereas 'with Eliza Douglas, I'm often working at a formative stage on the first steps of a piece that then becomes specific signatures ... specifically from her world of fashion and dressing'. Signatures that are copied throughout the piece, forming a continuity with Douglas' aesthetic of wearing 'found, graphic t-shirts with faces on them to assemble a kind anti-form sculpture' (Imhof and Wood 2019).

Imhof's ensemble is formed of long-time friendships from Frankfurt and also performers from The Forsythe Company which was closed by its founder, William Forsythe, in 2015. Adding to this has been 'new talent' brought in by Douglas, such as Sacha Eusebe who she met on a Balenciaga modelling campaign (Freeman 2019). The ensemble for *Sex*, excluding Imhof, consisted of fifteen performers in all.



Figure 5 Eliza Douglas in rehearsal for BMW Tate Live Exhibition: *Sex* at Tate Modern, London, 2019. Photography: Nadine Fraczkowski, Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.



Figure 6 Sacha Eusebe in rehearsal for BMW Tate Live Exhibition: *Anne Imhof: Sex* at Tate Modern, London, 2019. Photography: Nadine Fraczkowski. Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.



Figure 7 Installation view of *BMW Tate Live Exhibition: Anne Imhof: Sex* at Tate Modern, London, 2019 © Tate Photography (Oliver Cowling/Andrew Dunkley).



Figure 8 Sex Performers on Pier. Dir and Choreography: Anne Imhof. Tate Modern Tanks, London, 29 March 2019. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.



Figure 9 Sex Performers at Press Preview. Dir and Choreography: Anne Imhof. Tate Modern Tanks, London, 21 March 2019. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.



Figure 10 Sex Audience on Pier and Performer on Ground at Press Preview. Dir and Choreography: Anne Imhof, 21 March 2019. Tate Modern Tanks, London (March). Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

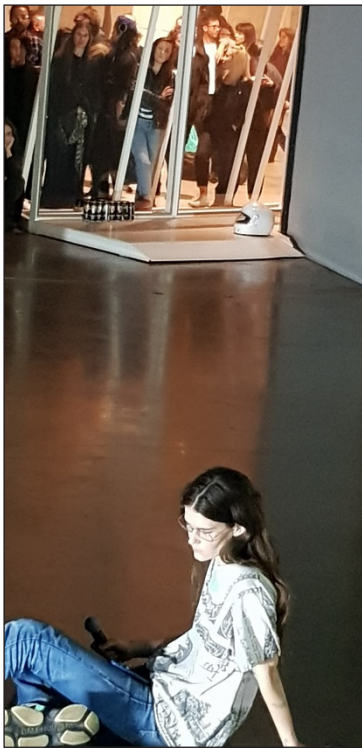


Figure 11 Sex. Eliza Douglas in Performance. Dir and Choreography: Anne Imhof. Tate Modern Tanks, London, 29 March 2019. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

During the Sex Press Preview, I asked Imhof if she was influenced at all by Pina Bausch, given that her performances tended to be eclectic, durational, physical, repetitive and seemingly concerned with relationships, all key *Tanztheater* motifs. She agreed that she had been influenced by Bausch but only in respect of the multi-layeredness of Bausch's work, whose particular focus on relationships Imhof turned instead into a 'deconstruction of relationships'. It cannot be said that she shares Bausch's fondness for comic, erotic iterations of encounters. Imhof also claimed that she was 'very intrigued on how to articulate her "abstract" artforms'. She believes that 'multi-layeredness is a good way to talk about them' (2019b). Imhof, like Bausch, combines a visually rich multi-layered production style with techniques apparently drawn from both Brecht's 'epic theatre' and Artaud's concept of a 'theatre of cruelty'. Her performers can be seen to apply 'method' principles, infusing their interactions at times with intensity and pain. At the same time, they use 'defamiliarization' techniques, negating 'the spectator's empathetic identification by presenting their role-playing as self-consciously theatrical, to the point of parody' (Broadhurst 2012: 95). The result, as with *Tanztheater*, is a heterogeneous performance that instantaneously distances and engages the spectator, though with very different means. Sex has none of those stories-within-stories with which the latter lures us into microcosms of human interaction. It is, so to speak, 'withholding' as regards any handles on everyday exchanges; it inhabits, in effect, a very aesthetically hypertrophied zone. As Imhof has said in conversation with Adrian Searle: 'Whenever someone asks me what the work is about, there is an emphasis on "contentlessness" – a hollowing out. But it should be OK to do something for the sake of it' (Searle 2019).

Imhof stated that she did not expect her audience would stay permanently in the performance space for the full four hours duration but assumed they would leave and return in their own time. Again, she reiterated that she did not choreograph the performance but left it to the performers to bring their own movement and make their own decisions (Imhof 2019b). Elsewhere, however, she has stated that Sex is more choreographed than her previous works. This was necessary since 'we have to create ways of moving through these vast spaces and connect what is happening in one room to another' (Freeman 2019). Given that she had to work on this scale, communication is very important for the group (Imhof 2019b). In Sex this takes the form of text messages repeatedly sent to the performers' iPhones, who thus follow her directions throughout the performance. Such real-time control of their movement, and consequently the movements of the audience, create in the former a somatic dependence on technology which results in a mixture of scripted, planned performance and quite a lot of spontaneity, albeit of a rather hegemonic kind. It certainly keeps both the performers and the audience on their toes, moving to and fro between the spaces and clambering up the piers,

both in their respective spaces. Hallucinations and dreamscapes, forms of non-linear, non-narrative mental activity, are admissible to and even suggested by this work. Interpretations of these are at least ‘intersemiotic’ (see Broadhurst 1999, 2007) but may also be (to appropriate a theological term) apophatic, resistant to verbalisation.

SEX AND TEMPORALITY

A common reaction to Imhof’s performances, and especially *Sex*, is that it did not feel like almost four hours of performance, this is because our subjective sense of duration appears to have accelerated whilst ‘objective’ time has continued normally. According to Imhof, in conversation with Phillipa Snow:

It’s true that making *Sex*, we were talking a lot about the way that sometimes I tend towards extremes, because that’s what interests me; but it’s more about melding these extremes, letting them blur into one thing, and the space you have in-between when there are two sides of something. What is the line that exists between them? It’s about a longing for that line to not exist. It’s about a longing for nonlinear time. (Snow 2019)

The ancient Greeks had two words for time: *chronos* and *kairos*. The first term refers to chronological, quantitative objective time, whilst the second implies subjective qualitative time. Unlike my own temporal experience of this performance, for Snow:

Four hours spent immersed in *Sex* feel, alternately, like four minutes or four years. Notable moments, thrilling and discrete, are spaced-out by long stretches of inertia. Every so often, something minor and yet not minor occurs. (Snow 2019)

The structure of this work creates its own temporal coordinates. I compare the effect on me of *Sex* in performance with that of a vastly different, narrative-based work of comparable length, Wagner’s hybridized multi-layered performance of *Tristan and Isolde* (2016). This was a four-hour production, directed by Daniel Kramer, at the English National Opera (ENO). The notion of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* is particularly relevant, as are the influences of Schopenhauer’s ‘Philosophy of Pessimism’ and to a lesser extent Nietzsche’s apologetics. The main ingredients of Wagner’s ‘total art work’ were ‘dance, music and poetry’, of which existing traditions made scant use. Other forms of plastic arts were also drawn in to provide a further intermingling of art forms. Again, according to Wagner: ‘not a single richly developed capacity of the individual arts will remain unused in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the future’ (Roberts 2011: 75). Therefore, a fundamental reconsideration of the elements of pre-existing opera gave an indication as to the scale and combination of future manifestations of hybridity in his work. In *Tristan and Isolde*, there are nuances within music and libretto which invoke all of these in the work’s treatment of *Liebestod*, self-immolating romantic passion.

Like *Tristan and Isolde*, *Sex* also has music at its core but its form is worlds apart from the ‘Music-Drama’ of Wagner. In *Sex*, there is far more music than in the previous performances of *Angst* and *Faust*. The songs, mainly sung by Douglas on guitar, also appear to be linear, the only element of *Sex* that seemingly has a beginning, middle and end. They were sung as solos, sometimes group and sometimes duets. The music was ‘made together with Imhof and composer Billy Bultheel’ (Searle 2019). They are songs of sex, passion and death, providing a further ‘defamiliarization’ device by being juxtaposed alongside some of the other actions or non-actions in the spaces.

Since any aesthetic work is not the exclusive hermeneutic property of its creators, one can feel licensed to make associations that the latter might not accept. To my mind, Imhof’s ‘total theatre’ appears to be strongly related to Wagner’s notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* with all its various combinations of media. However, Imhof denies this, stating that she has ‘real problems with that, I don’t want to be compared to Wagner!’ (Searle 2019). The vehemence of this rejection might suggest that this comparison has been made on previous occasions (and indeed in a contemporary German cultural context, references to Wagner, as indeed to Heidegger also, are still seen as carrying potentially disturbing political connotations).

Sex, with its non-linear narrative, is experientially so much shorter (at least for me). I think the experiential difference lies in what I call ‘internal discreteness’. *Tristan and Isolde* is a ‘through-

composed' work, unrolling in continuous slow-moving exchanges and set-pieces. In contrast, the choreography of *Sex* unfolds in a fragmented, physical, sensual performance with episodes of convulsively fast movement juxtaposed with *longeurs* of lethargic pauses. In this sense, it would be said to be analogous more to the heterogenous structures of pre-Wagnerian opera, with their internal divisions of recitative, aria and chorus, than to the epic unity of his works.

In interpreting a poem or a work of art we are dealing with something that could be seen as an interpretive spiral or a 'hermeneutic helix' rather than a circle. It begins with our entering interpretive (thoughtful) reading; however, the ending is never clearly defined. Heidegger points to this when he writes: 'What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way ... In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing' (1978: 195). Imhof's *Sex* is a 'happening' in process which elicits new insights at every stage of its duration (see Broadhurst, 1999: 172–3). In my opinion it does so by manipulating what Heidegger called the 'hermeneutical situation' of an audience: we approach the work 'fore-having' (in his lexicon of terms, see Heidegger 1978: 190–1) a range of traditional meanings for a linear theatrical performance, but our 'fore-sight', our choice between any one of these genre-based interpretive routes, is continually thwarted by its contradictory character, and so our 'fore-conception', our resolved pursuit of a particular route, is always blocked. We are forced to improvise and (taking this word in its strict meaning) to 'ex-temporise', to find a solution 'out of time'.

My thoughts on temporal affect invoke that loose bundle of notions expounded by Nietzsche and subsequently called his 'theory' of 'Eternal Recurrence'.³ Even Nietzsche scholars struggle to defend its coherence, but at its core lies a rejection of an 'end of time', both in simple duration but also in terms of *telos*, transcendent purpose. However, the absence of teleology is something that harmonizes with both the form and content of this work. In form, the lack of narrative development in *Sex* makes its duration (unlike that of *Tristan and Isolde*) eminently reversible; there is no graspable end-state to be reached. Nietzsche extended his speculation to postulate that each of us would effectively re-live our lives forever, and that the only affirmative response was that of *amor fati*: to assent to, to love this fate (Nietzsche 1979: 67–8). Beneath the non-linear hybridized images that inhabit *Sex*, there is a sense-in-nonsense that it symbolically portrays an idea, a biological necessity and a chaotic world (not too dissimilar from our own lived experiential world) which unlike Nietzsche's *Eternal Recurrence* can never be repeated, it can only be re-presented.

CONCLUSION

I suggest that the theoretical inheritance of the four thematic strands which I mentioned above has allowed Imhof to situate her work within an aesthetic territory which is vectored, so to speak, by all of them together. I think that such an explicit coincidence of the features these strands manifest, in so far as a general audience is now receptive to, and conscious of them, is a relatively recent occurrence; I cannot imagine these practices commanding such mainstream attention twenty years ago. The critical (not to mention the commercial) climate has changed so as to allow them space and funding.

Imhof is not an overtly theoretical artist; in conversation she is not anxious to locate her practice within a verbalised context of other and previous works. Therefore, thematic analysis such as I have given above must remain to some extent conjectural, and may not perhaps meet with much assent from Imhof herself. Rather, her practice seems to have informally adumbrated elements of the visual culture and tropes of Internet-based media, and refined them into autonomous works.

Imhof's work represents some of the more intelligent contemporary attempts to combine what, individually, might seem rather established media and genres, in ways which are challengingly original. None of the elements she and her ensemble deploy are shockingly new, but from them she has demonstrated that new modes of hybrid work are still possible, without having recourse to hitherto unseen technology. She has exploited aspects of the mediated conventions of fashion and placed them in fresh and disturbing contexts; as a journalist from

³ Initially expressed in *The Gay Science* (1974) and developed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1969) and *Ecce Homo* (1979).

the Berlin-based *Monopol* remarked to me at the Press Preview of *Sex*, ‘her performers always look cool on Instagram’ (2019b). I consider her achievement to be part of a continuing, and at times deeply critical, convergence between performance practice and the tropes of mass consumer culture.


COMPETING INTERESTS

Susan Broadhurst is an editor of BST. This paper was subjected to double-blind peer review and handled by another editor.

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Susan Broadhurst is Professor Emeritus and Honorary Professor of Performance and Technology at Brunel University London, and is a writer and academic who has published widely in the field of experimental performance and especially, its interrelation with developing technology.

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