

I am here but you can't see me

Rabih Mroué

How should a person like me, coming from a region full of conflicts and confessional clashes, talk about or discuss the future; living in a region that is still witnessing endless wars and turbulence of geopolitical and sociopolitical nature. Wars assassinate the future. Even at times when the situation is calm and quiet and no fighting is going on - should we dare to make a future plan? Any political event could destroy it, change it or even wipe it out. A mere political speech including a few threats and accusations would jeopardize the future and bring us to the edge of a new war. In July 2006 Israel suddenly attacked Lebanon. There were many reasons behind this war, one could argue about them. But still, the Israeli reaction was hysterical and barbaric and caused Lebanon social and economic catastrophes and the massive displacement of people. The war resulted in hundreds of dead and thousands of injured people; so many lost their homes, parts of their bodies; and thus so many lost their future. Projects were cancelled, and our lives suddenly stopped. We found ourselves outside of history.

Since death has been transformed into an ordinary daily scene, the world has become a huge image-making machine pumping its images in all directions; an unstoppable flood of pictures. How many thousands of memories do we need in order to collect and to store this overflow of images? How can we live with it? And how do we kill the voyeuristic temptation and the desire to not let pass a single opportunity of eyeing them and peeping into their contents? As if we would long for swallowing these images as a whole, all at once, without intestines to digest them... Is this why all what is left of the image is its surface?

During this war that we experienced in Lebanon, and in spite of rendering almost everything in this small country dysfunctional, the Israeli Army abstained from destroying the power stations – what they usually did in every war - insisting on leaving us with the blessings of electric energy. The reason for this, I believe, is Israel's strong desire to allow us to follow the news, so that we may watch our own death "live" on television screens. Yet, how can the dead witness their own death?

We've exaggerated the use of images of death and destruction, in exposing and in watching them. The abundant and continuous images of dismembered and scorched corpses aired on television stations, and of corpses buried under the rubble, played a fundamental role in erasing everything. No limits stood in the face of television stations or cameramen. Corpses were exhibited in front of the cameras without social and religious taboos, hindrances or considerations. Death was filmed - in the absolute. Everything was shoved in front of the lens to be recorded and exhibited all at once.

How can the image, for the spectator, be an extension of his physical experience? How is it that the eye can see what it sees and understand what it sees? The master of the senses is vision. It is as though every image is there, only to delete the image preceding it. For the dead to see their own death means that they see everything all at once, they see nothing at all. Is this what "death was filmed in the absolute" meant? Would it have been better for us to rip our eyes out of their sockets so that we may be saved from this inevitable death?

The cancellation of the individual body

The recent wars allowed us to notice that there are two ways of how to wage a war: Through pressing buttons and by fighting with live flesh.

Not long ago, we watched the Gulf War live on television. There were no fighting bodies. It was a 'clean war'. Not long ago and until now, we have watched video letters sent by bodies straddled with belts ready to explode. Not long ago, we watched the fall of the Twin Towers, but we saw no bodies, no corpses. Not long ago and until now, in Iraq and Palestine, we have seen hundreds of corpses, exposed.

Between both the highly sophisticated war machine and the body ready to explode - how can our personal bodies fight for their right to exist, for their right to express?

Are they still capable of doing this? And whether the answer is affirmative or negative, how do we deal with this duality of machine/explosive body? In fact, what is common to this duality, what unites it somehow, is the cancellation of the individual body. In this sense, I dare to say that the problem of individualism that is usually faced by peoples of the Third World is no longer just theirs, for it now also concerns the developed countries, meaning the west. The body of the individual is asked to cancel itself for the benefit of the *society of security* now. Powers interfere with people's privacy and intimacy without a qualm and people accept this willingly. The society of security forbids the presence of a body with secrets and so, bodies are pried open, naked, emptied of their specificities, all in the name of security and the war against terror; this terror that has no body to fight against, has no army, no militia. Where is the terror, where does terror stand, here... - there?

Terror is an idea that is also invented to cancel the body. Bodies ready to explode at any time, and bodies that are always ready to abandon their singularity to prove that they are innocent of participating to some conspiracy or other; and all this in the name of the war on terror. Both cases are the ultimate significant expressions of the cancellation of the body.

Alongside this cancellation authorities offer us the mediatized body: A model, exemplary, beautiful and ideal body. A body that does not sweat, does not excrete fluids or smells, stands proud. This body is totally unrelated to our own. But because it is mediatized and globalized it becomes desired by us.

I don't know why matters are confused in my head when it comes to the body. Is it because the body of the actor - as I learned about it when studying at the university - seems to resemble the mediatized one? Maybe I am exaggerating a little, but it seems to me that theater, as I studied it, requires a perseverant body: active, ethically correct, athletic, well trained, obedient, experiencing no struggle with its context, a body up to a certain point programmed.

I must admit that I do not have the body that the theater asks for. And I don't know anyone around me who does. I assume that our bodies are tired; we live with lazy bodies, not beautiful in the required way, dejected, bodies filled with the scars of war! This body does not resemble the one that we see in pictures, the mediatized one.

With all this, how can our body stand on the stage? Or, how can this body produce a performance?

Yes, the issue is not how to represent this body in theater, or to illustrate how we are living, but to think of performance

through an alternative concept that takes our bodies into consideration and to reflect on performance in terms of a body crushed between the two cases I mentioned above - meaning bodies stuck between terror and the war on terror.

Powers ask us to give up our individual body for the benefit of the abstract body of the community, and to replace it with an image. To give up one's body means to decide, from this moment onwards, to go out into the new world without our real body, to have relationships without the real body, to isolate it, hide it, maybe leave it behind the screen of the computer or television and then wear a virtual one and enter the world. Sometimes I have the impression that I am but an image that just came out of a TV screen. It's as if I am myself a public image, distributed all around, without a clue as to who's responsible for its production! Is it me? Well, can I still produce an alternative image to face the distributed one? I discovered that my image had gone way ahead of me, and reached unhindered that place I was moving towards; it is already here, already there beforehand, it dwelled here and there and everywhere. So, I find myself following my image. Or is my image following me? I try to kill it. It tries to kill me, it succeeds and I fail, I return home a beaten man, the whole thing goes unmentioned.

Do we stand on stage to face our image? Or to run away from it?

What will the future of live performance be like? What first comes to my mind is the question of the body, since the body is the cornerstone of any performance. And this is why I went through this long introduction and talked about the cancellation of the body. Thus, the questions is: *What experiments and temptations await us?*

What route will we take?

During the past couple of years as a spectator, I have witnessed two different directions - among others - of how to approach theater performances. They seem to be contradictory, but so intriguing and fascinating that I think it is worth it to stop at them for a while and to try to understand their propositions as works that stand against the cancellation of the body.

The first approach tends towards hyper-technological shows where machines and special effects play an essential role. To a point where they can take over the space of the body on stage, where the visuals veil the body of the performer. The aim of such big productions is to create imagined worlds that compete with and surpass reality, the reality we live. And I assume this in an attempt to overcome the images of violence, natural catastrophes and wars that continuously bombard us in our daily lives. These performances try to save their spectators from the grip and high concentration of those images that are ceaselessly pumped through the media, and to take them to more exciting, perhaps more frightening levels, allowing spectators to contemplate and think, as opposed to be fed with easy emotions. They create a fictitious world that is selfreferential.

The objective of these performances is neither ethical nor moral or even ironic, but to produce works with constantly higher technical perfectibility to compete with cinema and video and TV – in order to keep the idea of the live performance vital and efficient.

Performance art has the opposite tendency: It goes straight for the real. The performance is based on documentary sources. It takes its subjects and its images from real events and it reintroduces them to the audience after

deconstructing and analyzing them and removed the aura surrounding them. This kind of performance usually relies on minimal technologies. Words are its principle tool, words that can create images and ideas in the minds of the spectators. Representation is the object of much questioning and doubt in these works, which play between fiction and reality, mix them up, blend them. They take away the confrontation between characters on stage, and direct it towards the audience. In other words, there are no characters on stage, or else there are, but they are a composite of their personal and non-personal narratives, of reality and fiction (as not confrontational characters). Here as well, the body is veiled. It is present but it is unproductive. The tongue has replaced the body.

In both approaches the body of the performer is absent on stage. Absence is not a cancellation. What does the absence of the body in theater actually signify? For me absence is one way of facing the cancellation of the body as pursued by the terror, as well as by the war on terror. In fact absence and presence are not a duality. Absence is built in the notion of presence and vice versa. Absence means that someone was supposed to be here but did not appear for one reason or another. In this sense, absence is a promise of coming back, of appearing again and this promise is important in relation with presence and reappearing.

Absence has the ability to shake the stability of the order, and here lies its importance. When absence enters ones life or the life of society it suspends it. The absence postpones the tranquility of the presence. It shakes the stillness. There is something full and now it is empty and this emptiness is waiting to be filled or refilled. It might be filled with the presence of the absent. Absence is a state between life and death. It is elsewhere.

I am here but you can't see me. Something is missing. The missing is a state of latency (another notion of absence). Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas, two Lebanese visual artists, gave an interesting definition of latency. For them, "latency is the state of what exists in a non-apparent manner, but which can manifest itself at any given moment. It is the time elapsed between the stimuli and the corresponding response."

How could one do art works and theater and dance performances with an absent body? It does not matter where they will take place, or how many performances there will be. What's important is the talk taking place after the show; the word that describes the performance to be an accomplished event; the talk that is here and there at once, and which will produce fascinating ideas and images; the talk that becomes the performance itself, and without which it's as if the performance never took place.

A declaration of emptiness?

Spaces haunted by the ghost of theater, by the absence of our bodies; waiting to be filled again with words, thoughts and remarks, with specters. Performance is elsewhere... It is these vacant spaces that no one can occupy for a long time, created to welcome us for brief moments, just for a while before we vacate them again. It is no place for permanent dwelling.

Theater is created to remain empty. The empty space is a generous one. I believe that the strength of theater is in declaring its absence today. For absence is a promise of return. (And declaring the emptiness is a sign of the presence of the absent.) It announces the search to fill this emptiness. The declaration of absence is not a death announcement, it is not a cancellation of the body, on the contrary, it is a struggle for the body, for the theater. Hence this is not another death

announcement but a postponement of sealing the fate of theater.

Let us postpone searching the *route that we might take in the future* and merely declare the absence of our bodies today. Let us move away from theater and point our fingers towards it from afar, let us present works where the specter of theater is present. Let us depart from the center and stand on the peripheries, and point towards the center, towards the theater... from far away let us look upon it, look to the city and its theater, filled with the burning desire to enter it and fill it again.