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Gestus, affect and the Post-Semiotic in Contemporary Theatre

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Abstract: With the break-up of the Soviet Union and the movement of its former member states towards democratic elections and capitalist economies, the Cold War was hastily and abruptly over. Triumphalist liberal and neo-conservative discourses proclaimed the end of communism and exhausted socialist populations welcomed the end of real existing socialism. Both politically and philosophically, the great modernist dualisms of communism and capitalism, East and West, Left and Right, had come to an end. This final act of deconstruction not only had profound effects on politics, culture and the everyday, but it also changed the terms and reference points for the processes of meaning-making, representation, interpretation and reception in the arts. Is there still a place for the arts of engagement in contemporary Europe? This paper proposes that these historic shifts in politics and the everyday find their artistic outlet in the shift from a gestic to an affective model of meaning and representation, or, from the semiotic to the post-semiotic. Whereas the Brechtian gestic model of social signification is based in the class war and the correlation of sign and referent, the affective domain, as theorised by Massumi drawing on Deleuze, is adaptable to a more fluid global realm. There is an associated movement from an emphasis on gesture to image. Gesture is indexical, it points to a relatively fixed social realm, whereas the image is everywhere in 'the image- and information- based economies of late capitalism.' Drawing on theatrical examples from Germany, the paper teases out the strengths and weaknesses of affect as a critical framework for new understandings of the arts of engagement.

Keywords: Image-based Theatre, Gestus, Affect, Semiotic and Post-semiotic, German Theatre, Contemporary Theatre

BRIAN MASSUMI'S THEORISATION of affect, as set out in 'The Autonomy of Affect' and in subsequent presentations and publications, continues to inspire scholarly and artistic debate.¹ It is the key element in a theoretical project that is widely regarded as an attempt to find the much-desired affirmative or third way of politics that seeks to move beyond the Left's relentless critique of late capitalist culture and the Right's overwhelming power within it. Massumi seeks to open up a margin of manoeuvrability within ideological accounts of subject formation that he considers to be unproductively locked into the binaries of male/female, black/white, right/left, gay/straight with which we are familiar. If the subject is so coded, systematised and positioned, he asks rhetorically, where is the potential for change.² Massumi's emphasis on manoeuvrability, the body and change and radical questioning of the epistemological *status quo* aligns him with progressive attempts at social transformation. Interviewed for *21C magazine* in 2003, Massumi makes explicit the links between the theory of affect and a revitalised radicalism that would offer freedom and joy, potential and insipience, change

and the new for the over determined and exhausted subjects of global capitalism.³ Affect is presented, therefore, as both a radical rethinking of critical theory and as an affirmative model that promotes virtuality with all its potential for hope and renewal.

Ironically, but not surprisingly, such promises have positioned Massumi himself as 'a champion of affect'⁴ and invited close scrutiny of his rhetorical style. Phillip Bell, for instance, questions his 'frequently idiosyncratic (or undefined) use of psychological concepts and the neologistic extravagances of much of the writing'.⁵ His more serious concern, however, is with Massumi's role in the rejection of psychology as a humanist discipline. Problematic also is the extent to which Massumi's theorisation of an affective turn in thought rests on a generalised critique and dismissal of materialist, gendered and race-based theories of subject formation. Clare Hemmings makes the important point that any 'narrative that posits a contemporary critical break' with prior knowledge 'has a vested interest in reading for generality instead of complexity.'⁶ Indeed, it is just this kind of tendency that this paper will examine in its comparison of affect with earlier claims for the

¹ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual : Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2002.

² *Ibid.* p. 3.

³ Mary Zournazi, 'Navigating Movements: An Interview with Brian Massumi' in *21C Magazine* 2003 downloaded from www.21cmagazine.com/issue2/massumi.html

⁴ Clare Hemmings, 'Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the ontological turn', *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 5 September 2005, p. 554.

⁵ Phillip Bell, 'Neo-psychology or Neo-humans? A critique of Massumi's *Parables of the Virtual* (2002)', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2003.

⁶ Hemmings, *op.cit.* p. 555.



transformative potential of a new concept, such as the Brechtian Gestus.

My interest in affect is confined therefore to a consideration of its usefulness as a way of understanding the political power of the image within 'the image- and information-based economies of late capitalism'⁷ that Massumi also refers to as 'post-ideological'.⁸ Drawing on an account of the reception among cognitively dysfunctional patients in a hospital ward of a televised speech by Ronald Reagan, Massumi extrapolates on the affective power of the image. The example is derived from Oliver Sacks' *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*⁹ and relates how in place of the cognitive reception of Reagan's language, some of the patients read and responded to the 'extraverbal cues: inflection, facial expression, and other gesture – body language' which they found to be comically inept.¹⁰ And here was the conundrum. While Reagan suffered a 'double dysfunction': he could neither sustain a logical argument nor could he get the nonverbal cues right, he was elected for two terms of office and he refocused the United States towards a hard-line neo-conservative agenda. Massumi concludes that Reagan 'was able to produce ideological effects by non-ideological means'.¹¹ In other words, while Reagan's agenda was ideological, his reception was primarily post-ideological. According to Massumi's analysis, Reagan's televised face, together with his vocal timbre and mannered delivery created an 'air of confidence'.¹² Many of us recall Reagan's modulated voice and smile, both charming and unruffled, that suggested the educated and reasonable, 'quiet' American. But this confidence, Massumi points out, is 'the apotheosis of affective capture'.¹³ People were soothed by Reagan's voice, which demonstrated none of the gestural hyperbole of fascist leaders. Yet, for all Reagan's quiet composure, Massumi identifies the actor/president with that 'face of mass affect',¹⁴ normally attached to a more florid rhetorical style. If Reagan was more performer than politician and if his political edge was more to do with the affective power of his image than with language and signification, then not only is his performance post-ideolo-

gical, as Massumi suggests, but also post-semiotic, a point to which I will return later in this paper.

Massumi's commentary on political processes raises important questions about how images work in the arts – in visual arts, theatre, music, performance and cinema – where practice often critiques society and its economic and political formations. If affect is contentious ground in critical theory, it is germane to the arts. Claire Colebrook observes, following Deleuze, that 'art creates affects and percepts' that free or release our responses 'from organising systems of representation',¹⁵ so that affect is properly discussed within the frame of arts practice. In its most general sense, affect is 'what happens to us when we feel an event: fear, depression, laughter, terror or boredom'.¹⁶ Affect, according to Colebrook, is not the meaning of an experience but the response it prompts.¹⁷ It is not that the arts free us from the symbolic order, but that affect in art 'disrupts the everyday and opinionated links we make between words and experience'.¹⁸ In this respect, affect theorises responses to the arts that are not only cognitive, but also affective, sensual and erotic as in our unmediated, 'autonomic' or involuntary responses. It is easy to imagine affect in relation to music. The emphasis on image, body and movement, while considered primarily in philosophical terms and with political application, also invites a special application to theatre and performance, whose liveness demonstrably elicits charged and felt involuntary responses in spectators as in the sigh, the catching of breath, rapturous applause and so on. If Reagan is a performer/president, then as Jill Dolan has argued in a different but related context, the performative nature of contemporary politics means we are all called upon to be drama critics.¹⁹ My suggestion is that the theory of affect offers performance analysis a very useful analytical tool for a rethinking of meaning and representation in the theatre and performing arts.

This paper focuses, therefore, on how affect produces new and different perspectives on arts practice and criticism. It considers the possibilities of affect as a mode of articulating the perception and reception of cultural artefacts, here performance, in both its

⁷ *Parables of the Virtual*, *op.cit.* p. 27.

⁸ In the interview with Mary Zournazi, Massumi refers to post-ideological media power that became more pervasive in the Reagan years. Zournazi, *op.cit.*

⁹ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, London: Picador, 1985.

¹⁰ *Parables of the Virtual*, *op.cit.* p. 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 40.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 41.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 42.

¹⁴ Zournazi, *op.cit.*

¹⁵ Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, London & New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 21-22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Claire Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze*, Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2002, p. xix.

¹⁸ Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁹ Jill Dolan, 'Rehearsing Democracy: Advocacy, Public Intellectuals, and Civic Engagement in Theatre and Performance Studies' in *Theatre Topics*, 11.1, March 2001, p. 6.

rational and sensate modes. In this respect, the paper addresses points of connection between the everyday subject and the cultural artefact: spectator and image, audience and theatre, artist and politics. It makes a comparative study of earlier modes of articulating the connection between the arts and society that were devised for different historical periods. These are the concept of *Gestus*, that Brecht intended as a practical and theoretical tool for showing and criticising the relations of power under capitalism. *Gestus* is both an actor's technique and a critical device developed in an earlier era for the struggle against fascism in the first half of the twentieth century. *Gestus* is linked to representation which made it amenable in the 1980s to the field of theatre semiotics, which emerged as an account of theatrical representation. Theatre semiotics, derived from Saussure and Barthes, was also a way of reading the language-like behaviour of stage signification, including dialogue, costume, lighting and props, for its ideological subtext. Semiotics was devised for the late twentieth century project of unmasking the ideological power of the sign. The contentious point is: if as the example of Reagan suggests, images communicate affectively, and, as Massumi claims, we have entered a 'post-ideological' era, then a gestic or semiotic analysis no longer has full explanatory capability. The historical overview offered by the paper leads to a concluding section in which affect is applied to contemporary performance through an analysis of German theatre-maker Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Bitte Liebt Österreich* [Please Love Austria] (Vienna, 2000).

Politics of Affect - Towards an Affective Theory of Image-Based Power

Massumi's writing, like contemporary postmodern performance, is accumulative, associative, circular and repetitive rather than linear. Anecdote and observations of everyday life blend with deep philosophical knowledge. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Massumi's philosophical influences are Spinoza and Bergson, but his range also includes popular media culture. References to film and Ronald Reagan offer a familiar introduction to affect but then there is the abrupt historic claim that 'affect holds a key to rethinking postmodern power after ideology.'²⁰ Disagreeing with Fredric Jameson's claim that there has been a waning of affect in postmodern culture, Massumi argues that our condition, on the contrary,

is characterised by a 'surfeit of it.'²¹ Playing with language, he proposes that the 'new functioning of the mass media' has left the traditional Left behind.²² Speaking of the United States, Massumi notes that the Left seems incapable of creating any positive media-impact.

Affect as set out by Massumi is a concept that resists fixed definition and closure but works as a name, an adjective and gives rise to a field, as in the affective domain. He traces philosophical interest in affect back to Spinoza whose definition of affection he reads in two ways. Firstly, affect is an impingement on the body during which it exists, temporarily, in a state of 'passional suspension', outside consciousness, and, secondly, an idea, during which the impingement, received as sensate, is raised 'to a higher power to become an activity of the mind.'²³ A third process occurs as affect is 'enfolded' into the body, taken in and accommodated before it 'attains the level of conscious reflection' at which point it can be rejected, rationalised and edited out.²⁴ On this account, affect involves an encounter between 'an impinging thing', an image for example, and then an abstraction of the encounter into a trace or form that appears, through 'a doubling over', as conscious reflection. Mind and body are therefore seen as two levels at play, of which affect is their 'excluded middle', a space of 'suspension' prior to their separation as cognitive and affective, consciousness and feeling. In this sense affect can be conceived as a 'third state.'²⁵

Massumi finds a resonance between affect and theories of complexity and chaos, as well as Bergson's ideas of the virtual and Deleuze's ideas of emergence and intensity. Certainly, in its more everyday sense, Massumi equates affect with intensity. As he writes:

Intensity is embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin – at the surface of the body, at its interface with things.²⁶

Colebrook offers the example of disgust, or the recoil of the nostrils at the smell of cheese.²⁷ If affect impinges on the body, it carries connotations of intrusion, invasion and of getting under the skin, that is to say, it is an involuntary response.

The emphasis given to the primacy of the affective in image reception is undoubtedly the most compel-

²⁰ *Parables of the Virtual*, op.cit., p. 42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²² Mary Zournazi, op.cit.

²³ *Parables of the Virtual*, op.cit., p. 31-2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁷ Colebrook, Gilles Deleuze, op.cit., p. 21-22.

ling aspect of the theory. In a series of deductions based on the work of communications researchers, Massumi contends that the complex process of image reception is 'multilevel, or at least bi-level.' Image reception, he explains, involves an 'immediate bifurcation' as the viewer responds to two systems. One is related to the content of the image which is indexed to conventional meaning and is semantically or semiotically ordered. The other is related to the felt effect, which is ordered according to 'something else' via the strength, duration or intensity of the image. The two different orders of reception operate in parallel with the content-based reception resonating at a 'deeper' level of consciousness where memory, cognition and emotion operate, while the feeling effect is 'nonconscious,' 'outside expectation and adaptation,' 'disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration' and acts as a crossed wire from the semantic.²⁸ Massumi explains, by means of examples, that there is no correspondence or conformity between, for instance, content and intensity: something might be sad but produce pleasure, be very good but boring or meaningless but affective as in violence and the pornographic. Importantly, understanding the power of the image as residing in its affect or intensity in parallel to its content means that semantically or semiotically-ordered levels of analysis are no longer adequate to the task.

In a later commentary, Massumi suggests that affect is a way of talking about 'the margin of manoeuvrability' in 'every present situation' and links it to the possibility of unlocking entrenched thinking, structures and habitual patterns of reception.²⁹ He re-asserts the radical potential of uncertainty and the possibilities afforded by threshold-crossing, renewal and change. The concept of affect is thereby presented as part of a wider theory of change.

Gestus: a Body Bearing the Weight of Signification

To return to Massumi's proposition that 'affect holds a key to rethinking postmodern power after ideology' we might reconsider previous claims made about other analytical tools, such as the Brechtian Gestus. For Brecht, Gestus is a performance style or technique for the actor:

The realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another is what we call the realm of gest.³⁰

John Willett's 1959 interpretation is cited as one of the clearest:

It is at once gesture and gist, attitude and point: one aspect of the relation between two people, studied singly, cut to essentials and physically or verbally expressed.³¹

In a 1982 collection of essays, Patrice Pavis links Gestus to the emerging field of theatre semiotics. Pavis makes the claim:

This Gestus (close to enunciation, a linguistic term which describes the attitude of the speaker to his utterance) gives us a key to the relationship between the play being performed and the public.³²

Pavis's essay, 'On Brecht's Notion of Gestus', is a rereading of Brecht from within the turn from a structuralist to a poststructuralist or from a modernist to a postmodernist perspective on the relation of art and society. Its focus is firmly embedded in the constitution of performance as a social relationship between the stage and the public sphere. Rather than a closed and autonomous object, the text is read, as Barthes understood it, as 'a moving play of signifiers without any possible reference to one or some fixed signifieds.'³³

Reflecting on the 1980s, it is apparent that the emerging field of theatre semiotics drew productively on Brecht's technical terms to develop a methodology for analysing the discourse of performance. The emphasis on what transpires between the stage and the auditorium opened up an untheorised space in performance studies that Gestus went some of the way towards filling. It was understood to make the social point of a play clearer, accessible and more readable and to explain the relay of messages from the actor's to the spectator's body. Importantly, Gestus would be the key to unlocking the mystifications of performance and its ways of communicating textually, gesturally and also corporeally. Where the dramatic world on the stage was a representation of the social world, Gestus would be an instructive critical intervention in the lived relations of power. The Brechtian Gestus, devised to oppose bourgeois aesthetics and fight fascism, bolstered theatre semiotics' claims that it offered a means of reading the politics of theatrical representation.

²⁸ *Parables of the Virtual*, op.cit., p. 24-5.

²⁹ Zournazi, op.cit.

³⁰ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. by John Willett, London: Methuen, 1984, p. 198.

³¹ Hector Maclean 'Gestus in Performance: Brecht and Heiner Müller' in *New Essays on Brecht: The Brecht Yearbook*, 26 Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001, p. 81.

³² Patrice Pavis, *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of the Theatre*, New York: PAJ Publications: 1982, p. 42.

³³ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* trans. by Stephen Heath London: Fontana, 1987, p. 10.

It is apparent that we have moved from the image to something that is physically or verbally expressed, but I want to bring the discussion back to the visual. Brecht's famous example of Gestus is of Mother Courage biting the sergeant's coin, to see if it is good, before slipping it into her purse and snapping it shut.³⁴ The action, suspicious and careful, indicates a whole range of determinant social relations including her self-identity as a respectable tradeswoman amongst peasant soldiers. Video documentation of the Berliner Ensemble's 1949 production, directed by Brecht and with Helene Weigel in the title role, offers an enduring image of the incident that transforms it into visual history. Weigel's biting of the coin has subsequently become an image of Brechtian theatre or, more precisely, the enduring power and conundrum of Gestus.

As Hector Maclean points out, Gestus is not an isolated moment in a play, but has close links with the Fable as in the narrative or story line of the drama. Maclean's translation of Brecht's colleague, Berliner Ensemble director Manfred Wekwerth, is helpful:

Brecht understood Fabel as the totality of all incidents (Vorgänge), which emancipate themselves on stage into gestic attitudes (Gestus).³⁵

However, Maclean makes the important qualification, that despite the Fable being composed of its gestic incidents, it is not predetermined. That is, each gestic incident contains its contradiction, the alternative course of action that would lead to a different outcome. The necessary fluidity of Gestus, that is, its point of indeterminacy and discontinuity becomes visible, for instance, when in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Grusha, the servant-girl, hesitates before picking up the abandoned baby. The dialectical operation of Gestus includes, crucially, its capacity for change. There is a degree of fluidity but it is created and positioned, even apprehended, ideologically.

In his most recent discussion of the term, and despite some earlier misgivings,³⁶ Pavis has elaborated on Gestus as follows:

A gesture, particularly an actor's gesture, is only readable in relation to the gesture of another

person; hence the importance of theories of *gestus* (Benjamin, Brecht) that examine the way in which social determinations and hierarchical relationships are inscribed in exchanges of looks, relations between body masses, difference in attitudes.³⁷

Gestus, as it is commonly understood, reveals hidden or naturalised social relations and hierarchical relationships. Tim Mehigan has added that Gestus is an external revelation of concealed ideological relationships. It has a 'special type of visibility' that marks out and fills the intersocial spaces between human subjects.³⁸ Feminists have adapted Gestus for revealing the social determinations and hierarchies of gender.³⁹ The term has proven amenable to a number of applications, including the postmodern as recognised by Elizabeth Wright as well as Maclean and others.⁴⁰ In this latter case, as German dramatist Heiner Müller's work has shown, Gestus is capable of functioning outside the linear narrative of the Fable. In this respect, the Gestus assumes more autonomy as fragmented moments of linguistic, gestural and historic signification.

The point of comparing the claims made on behalf of affect and Gestus is for the way they both address the perceived needs of a particular historical-political formation: postmodernism for affect, capitalism for Gestus. Both address reception. Both attempt a theory of the intersubjective and intersocial that includes the body with its autonomic and habituated responses. Affect gives more prominence to the former, Gestus the latter. They are rich contestable terms that offer powerful tools for analysing the artistic production of meaning and power in society. The question of the effectiveness of Gestus for intervening in the late capitalist image- and information-based economies, for which Massumi writes, now arises. How does Gestus help articulate image-based or postdramatic theatre? Brecht had intended that epic theatre would change consciousness and so change the world. To do this, he imagined a cognitive response that would make people think and act differently, but it was also about the body as this quote shows,

We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses pos-

³⁴ Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, trans. By John Willett, London: Methuen, 1980, p.12.

³⁵ Maclean, *op.cit.*, p. 84.

³⁶ See Patrice Pavis, 'Brechtian Gestus and Its Avatars in Contemporary Theatre' in Maarten van Dijk et. al. eds., *The Brecht Yearbook*, Vol. 24, Waterloo, Canada: The International Brecht Society, 1999, pp.177-189. In this essay, Pavis argues that the theatre of images absorbs Gestus and that social markers of difference have been all but erased.

³⁷ Patrice Pavis, *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance and Film*, trans by David Williams, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003, p. 70.

³⁸ Tim Mehigan, 'Brecht and Gestus: The Place of the Subject' in *Faultline* 2.93.

³⁹ Denise Varney, 'Feminist Sexual Difference: a Feminist Appropriation of Brecht' in *New Essays on Brecht: The Brecht Yearbook* 26, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001, p. 127. See also Elin Diamond, 'Gestic feminist criticism' in *Unmaking Mimesis*, London & New York: Routledge, 1997.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Wright, *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation*, London & New York, 1989.

sible within the particular field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.⁴¹

We see here in Brecht a vision of the possibilities of cognitive and affective responses marshalled for progressive politics. Massumi describes affect as a primarily non-cognitive response, as an impingement, involuntarily taken into the body, 'embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin.' But he also says in a Brechtian way, (who also wrote in parables), that 'its matter-of-factness needs to be taken into account in cultural and political theory'.⁴² In the final analysis, affect is linked to knowledge, thought and materiality. It is positioned by Massumi as an account of the post-narrative and post-ideological spaces of a mediated image-based culture. Gestus, however, has shown itself to be a resilient and adaptable analytical tool, able to operate outside narrative and able to identify the ideological or the historical in its new manifestations.

The following and final section of this paper compares the two concepts and considers their usefulness as tools for the analysis of a contemporary performance event.

Christoph Schlingensief's *Bitte Liebt Österreich*: getting under the Skin in the Square

Bitte Liebt Österreich [Please Love Austria] is an installation and performance event that takes place over six days in June 2000 at Herbert von Karajan-Platz in Vienna next to the Viennese Opera House. Its controlling idea is the adaptation of the *Big Brother* concept to the eviction of asylum seekers. On the first day of the performance, Schlingensief as director and 'host' introduces to a curious public the 12 asylum seekers who enter the shipping containers where they will live until their eviction. The winner will receive a cash prize of 700,000 schillings. Above the container is a large sign, "Ausländer Raus" ["Foreigners Out"]. Alongside the sign are the equally emotive blue flags of Austria's anti-immigration far right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), whose leader Jörg Haider, has expressed sympathy for the Nazi era. The logo of the right wing tabloid newspaper, *Die Kronenzeitung*, is also prominently displayed. Each day, the megaphone-wielding Schlingensief, live in the square and online,

invites Austrians to evict the two asylum seekers they hate the most.⁴³ On eviction, the asylum seekers are escorted by security to a waiting car to be 'deported' to an unknown destination. The performance is a multi-media event, performed live in real time, simulcast on CCTV and the Internet and filmed for a documentary that is released on DVD in English and German and available through the shop on Schlingensief's website.⁴⁴

Bitte Liebt Österreich is chosen for the comparative analysis because it is an overtly political work that takes place in a public space and attracts a large and diverse audience of passers-by. The documentary is widely available to a global audience and it is documented on an extensive website.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Schlingensief's sense of street theatre recalls Brecht's proposal that the drama that surrounds a simple traffic accident on the street contains all the elements of dialectical theatre.⁴⁶ Schlingensief's event draws its audience into it as the public become performers in a riveting artistic project that has its basis in a real situation, that of the asylum seekers and their fate in present-day Austria.

The containers, the signs, the logos and flags disrupt the harmony of central Vienna, confronting its elegant bourgeois precinct with its excluded other. The event presents as a potent assemblage of images, people, noise and movement that cohere around the central issue of the swearing in, in February 2000, of a coalition government comprised of Wolfgang Schüssel's conservative party and Haider's FPÖ. At the time of the performance event, Austria is trying to have EU sanctions lifted. Standing on a platform in the square, Schlingensief with megaphone is the artist as *provocateur* challenging the coalition into an action it cannot undertake without revealing its fascist tendencies: to remove the sign and close down the event. In the meantime, he calls on tourists to photograph the truth of what's happening in Austria today. The event succeeds in running for the week and the daily evictions are observed by crowds and caught on camera. The people of Austria, inscribed with the collective memory of Hitler and Nazism, vote, watch and create the performance. In this way, as much as the asylum seekers in the containers, the Austrians in the square and online, manifest the ongoing problem of difference, inequality and oppression and the structures that reproduce it. It is a stunningly brilliant and seductive contemporary example of the enduring relevance and power of the arts.

⁴¹ Brecht, *op.cit.*, p. 190.

⁴² *Parables of the Virtual*, *op.cit.*, p.45.

⁴³ Christoph Schlingensief, *Bitte Liebt Österreich* [Please Love Austria], Vienna, 2000.

⁴⁴ <http://www.schlingensief.com>

⁴⁵ All comments made in this analysis are based on viewings of the DVD *Ausländer Raus! Schlingensief's Container* directed by Paul Poet, Austria, 2002.

⁴⁶ Bertolt Brecht, 'The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre' in *Brecht on Theatre*, *op.cit.*, p. 121.

In the first instance, the gestic elements of *Bitte Liebt Österreich* are clearly evident. The containers represent race ideology 'cut to essentials'. Their presence in the square critically reveals not only Austria but the affluent west's attitude to its non-citizen other and their objectification as commodities. The physical movements of the asylum seekers themselves, who arrive on a bus and enter the containers with their faces hidden from the cameras, are a further gestic sign of the hierarchical relationship between outsider and citizen. Their social determination as lesser beings with less human rights than citizens is made clear and readable. Like Mother Courage's wagon, the containers function as a *grundgest*, the single object that sums up the whole event, that is, the performance in its political context. The sign, "*Ausländer Raus*," strips away the layers of mystification, including discourses on assimilation, resources and, more recently, terrorism, that conceal the exclusionary intentions of the political Right. It quotes and exposes the ideology of the FPÖ.

Schlingensiefel also highlights the ideological subtext of the *Big Brother* phenomenon and its complicity with modes of racist exclusionary practices. The gest of voting off an evictee is exposed as a decadent form of democracy and points to the negative power of the multitude. It highlights the way race hatred is harnessed for political ends. This gestic reading finds that despite accusations that the event it is a stunt, it is heavily weighed down with intertextuality and history. The figure of Schlingensiefel exhorting people to expel an asylum seeker or do something about racism (for the love of Austria) stands as a heightened gesture, attitude and point about contemporary society.

Applying the theory of affect to *Bitte Liebt Österreich* produces a different reading but one that heightens its effect. The performance gets under the skin of many Austrians. An older woman screams at Schlingensiefel in a high-pitched voice full of shrill intensity; he enrages and outrages her. Her voice and manner are caught in a long sequence on camera. She is visibly held in a state of 'passional suspension,' behaving in a way that would otherwise endlessly embarrass a woman of her age acting like that in public. Her breathing is heightened and she paces to and fro, becoming conscious of her feelings and controlling and editing them before losing it again, unleashing a further invective at Schlingensiefel, attacking the container with her fist and throwing a bottle at him. She recoils from the unleashing of racist forces, is fearful of its outcome but is also responding to the chaos of the event and the mess outside the Opera House. Her reaction recalls Colebrook's observation that affect as presented in

art 'disrupts the everyday and opinionated links we make between words and experience.' As far as the elderly lady is concerned, Austria is not racist and the containers disrupt that understanding. But does her affective response free her from habitual modes of thought? Is her discomfort enough or do we demand more evidence of the insipience of affect, of its capacity to elicit something different? Is her affective response likely to initiate the experience of a third state between right and left, consciousness and feeling? In the end, her affective response becomes repetitious and comic. Restrained by security guards, she issues her final assault, calling Schlingensiefel first a German swine and then an artist. This last insult provides a measure of both the affective power of the artistic event and the limited power of the individual on a lone crusade.

In a similar vein, an old man in a leather cap and a brown suit, heavy with war medals, smiles admiringly at Schlingensiefel. He is attracted to the megaphone and when Schlingensiefel hands it over, he takes it lovingly and with a swagger. His affective pleasure is palpable, but also gestic. He is a good example of what Hemmings' refers to as 'the myriad ways that affect manifests precisely not as difference, but as a central mechanism of social reproduction.'⁴⁷ 'Off with their heads . . . Get rid of them all', he says, as if he has entered a post-ideological space where anything goes.⁴⁸ Yet, framed within the installation event, he becomes part of the show: a display figure redolent with Austria's secret. Looked at through a different critical process, that of semiosis, the old soldier is a player in a negative *mise en scene*, signifying through layers of textuality the enduring power of racist ideology. He becomes, for the educated observer, the sign that unmasks the secret pleasures of racism, its celebration of power over the other and its sensuous narcissism. On this view, his behaviour offers a critique rather than a way out or a third way. Read through the parallel operation of the affective, the old man and woman undergo an autonomic reaction to the image of the containers that is also fuelled by the inhibition-releasing effect of the surrounding chaos and noise. They help set out the issues surrounding the immigration debate, through leaving a trace of the affect, percepts and movements that attend the historical juncture of performance, media and politics.

Schlingensiefel himself is the major player in the event. By the end of the week, he takes to wearing a colourful velvet jacket to emphasise his role as artist. He plays Hitler, Stalin, Mao, a sideshow spruiker and a TV host cajoling and exhorting people to vote for their evictee. His image with the megaphone, on TV, online and in the documentary

⁴⁷ Hemmings, *op.cit.*, p. 551.

⁴⁸ *Ausländer Raus! Schlingensiefel's Container*, DVD.

presents a consummate media personality exuding the 'air of confidence' of the advertising voice-over and the old actor/president himself. The confidence is crucial to his capacity to direct the week-long event. The educated white German male performer, together with vocal timbre and cool manner, creates the 'apotheosis of affective capture.' He displays at once both the real and the parodic imitation of the power of affect.

In considering Massumi's bifurcated model of image reception, Gestus appears to deliver content and be semantically and semiotically ordered. However, composed on the body of the actor, Gestus also contributes to the strength, duration and intensity of the image and its affect. The old woman's prolonged screaming at the implacable Schlingensief operates as both affect and Gestus; the Gestus fuelling and creating affect. Applied to Schlingensief, the megaphone-wielding spruiker, affect, more than any other concept, helps to pinpoint in his performance 'the apotheosis of affective capture' that enfolds the audience into his chaotic performative world. In this world, he successfully utilises affect to disrupt and unsettle public expectations. It does more than reveal, it gets under the skin and unsettles. The creation of an affective domain in the centre of the city poses a challenge to the dominant social order.

In conclusion, this paper has considered how affect produces new perspectives on arts practice and criti-

cism and on meaning and representation. It considered modes of articulating responses to performance, in both its rational and sensate modes. In this respect, the paper addressed points of connection between the everyday subject and the cultural artefact: spectator and image, audience and theatre, artist and politics, the real and its representation. It made a comparative study of affect in relation to earlier modes of articulating the connection between art and society through the Brechtian concept of Gestus and theatre semiotics. The contention was that if, as the example of Reagan suggested, images communicate affectively, then a cognitively-based analysis offers limited explanatory power. In applying affect and Gestus in the paper's final section to Schlingensief's performance event, it found that affect operates at the more disruptive and potentially radical level of reception. It does more than quote and represent the ideological subtext of a given situation, it shows its capacity to create powerful responses. Gestus, however, emerges as a resilient and adaptable theory whose emphasis on gesture, the body and the inter-subjective retains explanatory powers that work in parallel with affect. Working in parallel, these two concepts articulate a re-invigorated area of arts practice – that of live performance – that emerges as a powerful critical intervention in a media-dominated cultural sphere.

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Dr Denise Varney is Senior Lecturer in Theatre Studies in the School of Creative Arts at the University of Melbourne. She is the co-author with Rachel Fensham (University of Surrey) of *The Doll's Revolution: Australian Theatre and Cultural Imagination* (2005) which focuses on Australian women writers and their impact on Australian culture. She has published numerous essays that encompass feminist theatre, Brechtian and contemporary German theatre, documentation of performance and Australian theatre. She teaches theatre semiotics, gender and performance, postmodern theatre and interdisciplinary studies in the arts. She has an active group of postgraduate students who are researching and publishing on contemporary performance. She is currently researching German Theatre since Reunification on an Australian Research Council Grant.

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