



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Rabbits, Machines, and the Ontology of Performance

Aleksandra Wolska

Theatre Journal, Volume 57, Number 1, March 2005, pp. 83-95 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2005.0040>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/179613>

# Rabbits, Machines, and the Ontology of Performance

Aleksandra Wolska

“I am tired of remembering”  
—Pablo Neruda<sup>1</sup>

A scholar, an actor, and a scientist walk into a bar. And so this essay began, in the dingy interior of Monk’s Bar in Philadelphia, as a joke spun out of a brief encounter with people who like to talk about theatre during their off hours. For a time, while writing this essay, I thought I would conceal its vaguely disreputable origin. But what happened there, in the dingy interior of Monk’s, kept returning with the vividness of a visitation.

At a bar table cluttered with glasses, utensils, napkins, and other objects, I watched a show already past (and one I had never seen). The play, entitled *machines machines machines machines machines machines*, had ended its run at the Philadelphia Fringe Festival.<sup>2</sup> Based on Rube Goldberg’s vision of technology, it centered on the idea of performing simple tasks in extraordinarily complicated ways, as in “tears (C), soak sponge (D), causing its weight to pull string (E), which lifts top of cage (F), and releases a woodpecker (G),” etc.—all to open a window.<sup>3</sup> Following Goldberg’s designs, the show’s creators—Quinn Bauriedel and Geoff Sobelle, both of whom acted in the piece—constructed a series of such machines for the performance. So there, at Monk’s, I listened as one of them narrated the action, making ashtrays into weights

---

*Aleksandra Wolska is an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota, where she teaches in the History/Theory Program and heads the MFA Directing Program. She has also been co-artistic director of the Stanford Summer Theatre, teaching at the Discovery Institute. She recently directed Macbeth at the University of Minnesota, and is currently working on a new show with the Philadelphia-based company Antique Mécanique. Dovetailing with her research on the phenomenology of performance, she is currently writing a book that explores the relationship between alchemy and Shakespeare’s theatre, The Poisoned Pearl and Other Enchanted Objects: Alchemical Transformations on Shakespeare’s Stage.*

---

I would like to thank Sonja Kuflinec (who also coined the first sentence of this article), Matthew Wagner, Rush Rehm, and the anonymous *Theatre Journal* readers for their feedback.

<sup>1</sup> Pablo Neruda, “A Certain Weariness,” in *Extravagaria*, trans. Alastair Reid (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), 65.

<sup>2</sup> *machines machines machines machines machines machines machines machines* was created by the theatre company Antique Mécanique. It was first performed at the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, September 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Rube Goldberg, an American cartoonist, became famous for inventing an array of devices that accomplished simple tasks in complicated and exasperating ways. This particular sequence describes a machine that enables one to “open a tight window.” See *Rube Goldberg: Memorial Exhibition: Drawings from the Bancroft Library* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1971), 24.

that held a spoon that balanced a menu that held up a bottle that balanced a pen. The scientist advised. I watched the performer's fingers transform napkins into machines, and straws into conduits of motion generated by breath. It became clear that I was involved, not in an exercise of remembering a bygone event, but in a form of its continuation—not a séance, in other words, but an unfolding.

The next day I visited both actors in their apartment on St. Alban's Street. There it was, again, the show, housed in what seemed like an urban wonderland. And, as one expects in a wonderland, a white rabbit soon made its appearance. When I returned to my own home, encounters with the show continued. In order to find the car keys, I looked for them in the refrigerator. They were there. I received a letter from one of the performers recounting how the performance was created: "[T]hat morning was the only day it poured down rain all summer . . ."<sup>4</sup> And rabbits—I saw them, too. In the evenings, they came out of nowhere, scampered off, then returned—now you see me, now you don't, now you do.

It was the arrival of spring that made me want to write about performance as an art of becoming rather than of disappearing: "O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies."<sup>5</sup> Transience is at work in theatre as well as in any temporal art; one cannot step twice into the same show. In performance, however, the action onstage does not glide uniformly toward the void. It also directs itself toward transmutation and change, flowing away from nothing toward an ever-expanding material appearance. As in the King James Bible, where the Song of Solomon follows Ecclesiastes, so in the theatre "Behold! Thou art fair" triumphs over the sinking feeling that "all is vanity."<sup>6</sup>

We critics, however, have sided with Ecclesiastes. At the heart of representation we find repetition, and within it, absence. The new that happens onstage is always the old, a repetition produced by *différance*.<sup>7</sup> (It is doubtful that Ecclesiastes would appreciate rabbits, for there is "no new thing under the sun."<sup>8</sup>) This mode of thinking, however, fails to encompass *machines machines'* new life as I encountered it at Monk's and at home. The impromptu theatricals at the bar constituted a variation, a modulation, and a play, a response to the inaccessible past, rather than a desire to recapture it. The rituals of re-presentation were absent.

To account for the spectacle at Monk's I propose that we focus on appearance as a category of thought. In other words, we need a discourse that can do magic and pull the ontological rabbit of performance out of the hat of theatrical disappearance. After

<sup>4</sup> Geoff Sobelle, letter to the author, 21 December 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Walt Whitman, "While Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry, Shorter Edition*, ed. Alexander W. Allison, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc., 1975), 379–84.

<sup>6</sup> Song of Sol. 1:15; Eccles. 1:2.

<sup>7</sup> Discussing Artaud's vision of theatre that would "present" rather than re-present, Derrida, like the weary Preacher, speaks of its impossibility: "There is no theater in the world today which fulfills Artaud's desire." However applicable to the fluctuation of meaning within a written text, Derrida's objection to the "metaphysics of presence" loses its purchase when applied to embodied arts. See Jacques Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," in *Mimesis, Masochism, & Mime—The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, ed. Timothy Murray (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 57.

<sup>8</sup> Eccles. 1:9.

all, rabbits think little of mimesis. Born every spring, they repeat nothing, but continue always the same, always different.

### The Art of Disaffection

"Time before and time after"  
—T. S. Eliot<sup>9</sup>

In the criticism of performance, we have lost our theoretical hold on the rather obvious fact that theatre engages forces of becoming as well as those of vanishing. Contemporary critics privilege performance's structure of disappearance.<sup>10</sup> The analysis of theatrical events remains dominated by metaphors of loss, framed by categories of repetition and transience. For Jacques Derrida, the stage can never achieve "representation which is full presence, which does not carry its double within itself as death."<sup>11</sup> The double to which he refers is not Artaud's double (the fullness of being) but rather "the interior duplication which steals the simple presence of its present act from the theater, from life, etc."<sup>12</sup> Although he rarely states so directly, this mimetic plight (or "menace of repetition" as he calls it) arises from the impossibility of having a nonconceptual encounter with phenomena, an encounter we desire but, apparently, cannot achieve. As a result, our recognition of what happens onstage is predicated upon prior forms of perception embedded in cultural signifiers. For the French critic, performance is an Oedipal tragedy, the anagnorisis of the original murder of an unmediated presence, founded on our being condemned to live our life in signs.

Not only repetition seems to be a problem. Critics who interpret the theatrical event as a form of absence also center their attention on transience. Framed in this way, a performance appears as the phantasmal after-effect of vanishing, the glimmer of immediacy arising in the in-betweenness of the onstage and the offstage, the living and dying of an event.<sup>13</sup> For Herbert Blau, to cite one example, the leading part in a play belongs to its continuous passing away. Caught between vanished past and impending future, the actor dies onstage, unable to abide within the full temporal presence at once promised and denied by theatre. This is how Blau imagines his response to the performance of Duse:

<sup>9</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1943), 17.

<sup>10</sup> I refer here to criticism of performance rooted in semiotics, which yields interpretative models based on the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Out of this basic structure, performance emerges in the interstices between disappearing and becoming. Typically, performance arises "in between the signifiers of self and Other, subject and object, actor and character, fact and fiction, mind and body. The being-caught-in-between, the performance alive between the snap of being there and not there (*fort-da*) . . . living on the borderlines between life and death." In this and other similar accounts we meet presence as vanishing, "the snap" between *fort-da*. See David McDonald, "Unspeakable Justice," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 130.

<sup>11</sup> See Derrida, "Theatre of Cruelty," 57.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Peggy Phelan writes: "Part of what performance knows is the impossibility of maintaining the distinction between temporal tenses, between an absolutely singular beginning and ending, between living and dying. What performance studies learn most deeply from performance is the generative force of those 'betweens.'" See Peggy Phelan, introduction to *The ends of performance*, ed. Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 8.

I have always retained (from I know not where) an image of her wholly alive in perfect stillness, then something passing over her face like the faintest show of thought, not the play of a nerve, only thought, and you would suddenly know that she was dying. I mean dying right there, *actually*, articulating the dying, with a radiance of apprehension so breathtaking, you could hardly escape your own death. Of course, you are dying too, actually, right there, in the play of thought.<sup>14</sup>

Death, of course, fails to appear in Blau's description. What does become visible is that which "passes over her face like the faintest show of thought"—time. In this case, time is understood as the performance of mortality. The notion of the theatrical event as a form of absence is predicated upon something even more fundamental than the mimetic plight. It finds itself on an awareness that dramatic action moves away from the past toward the future, and that this future brings the end. Onstage, death (loss) appears, not as a failure of signification, but as *tempus fugit*.

Although many of us know better—that time and space form a continuum that can fold the past into the future—we still cling to the sensation that time flies, second by second, leaving nothing behind. We remember St. Augustine, who, troubled by the sequence of flying instants, talked himself into a more humane temporal vision—time as the duration of expectation and memory. However, his famous description of temporal impasse—that time has no being, since the future is not yet, the past is gone, and the present does not linger—still maintains its grip on our imagination.<sup>15</sup> When applied to the stage, the notion of unraveling temporality macerates performance into a succession of fading instants, from the not-yet to the already-gone. However, as Paul de Man warned the critics of literature, every insight has its own blindness.<sup>16</sup> Considered within the structure of its disappearance, the manner in which theatre appears—that is, inhabits time, assumes a shape, and affects the present—becomes increasingly imperceptible. Does the paradigm of unstable meaning, and other ingenious ways of saying *panta rei* (all is flux), actually account for the constitution of theatrical phenomena as they occur in a performance? Does it help us to understand the processes that transform the theatrical stuff into the "cloud capp'd towers and gorgeous palaces" of the imagination?<sup>17</sup> Do we know how to fly on a magic carpet, talk to invisible people, and awaken when we are dead?<sup>18</sup> This is, however, what happens

<sup>14</sup> Herbert Blau, *The Eye of Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 181.

<sup>15</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 11:14. For a subtle and complex study of temporal aporia, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>16</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> It is precisely imagination that is not the answer here, but something else, a specific form of *techné* that treats the material world "poetically," and which Martin Heidegger calls "the essence of technology." See Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings: Ten Key Essays, plus the Introduction to "Being and Time,"* ed. D. F. Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 311.

<sup>18</sup> Heidegger suggests that the question concerning how things are made (in theatre and elsewhere) is anything but technological. It pertains to the mode of thinking through and within matter by way of an embodiment. An inquiry into technology necessitates examining how thought courses through the world, making and unmaking it. For Heidegger, technology is *poiesis*, a form of deep engagement of thought with the material world.

in theatre, or, as Bert States puts it, this is “how theater makes itself out of its essential materials.”<sup>19</sup> In order to engage performance critically, we must first let it appear within the field of vision, allowing it to enact its own becoming.<sup>20</sup> In other words, to retrieve performance from transience and other derivative categories of loss, we need to reckon with the notion of time, for “only through time time is conquered.”<sup>21</sup>

Temporal experience creates itself in performance through a complex network of interactions between performers and audience. This dynamic site of temporal and spatial activity resembles a Deleuzian plateau, “a region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination or external end.”<sup>22</sup> Regarded in this way, the spectacle of *machines machines* should flow continuously into the time/space of duration, where the twenty-three seconds becomes a unit of measurement placed on a scale that has no seconds on it:

[S]o we spent about a month putting it together and at the end had a showing, which we were kind of scared about, because after 4 weeks of work we had something like 23 seconds of material. . . . However, there was more to the play than we had anticipated, and our first performance at 1720 N. 5th Street came in at more like 45 minutes, but we had been drinking heavily, so I could have read the clock wrong.<sup>23</sup>

### Temporality in Performance

“I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future, and would in some way involve the stars.”  
—Jorge Luis Borges<sup>24</sup>

During rehearsals, neither actors, directors, nor designers are concerned with disappearance, but with its opposite—how to make things happen, appear, take place. For them time is anything but ephemeral, for it merges with the bodies of the actors and the elements of design. Functioning like a psychic substance, it can be stretched, contracted, immobilized, and accelerated; it shapes the performer’s body and saturates the *mise-en-scène*. For example, in comic chases involving rapidly opening and closing doors, time flows through the body like an electric current. In contrast, during the psychic crisis of a Chekhovian farewell, the actor’s body extends and elongates, as the audience watches the hand that reaches for a valise. Nowhere, however, does

<sup>19</sup> Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Performance is particularly suitable for elucidating the process of making things happen, for it brings about the awareness of what Heidegger, modifying the Greeks, identifies as the four fundamental modes of constructing anything whatever: matter (e.g., wood for Lear’s throne), form (its being a chair), function (something on which to sit), and, finally, the care and concern of its maker (someone who weighs options and considers alternatives). These four modalities “let what is not yet present arrive into presencing.” Heidegger, “Questions,” 311–41.

<sup>21</sup> Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” 16.

<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 22.

<sup>23</sup> Sobelle, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of the Forking Paths,” in *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, trans. Yates (New York: New Directions Books, 1962), 23.

theatrical time reveal itself as duration more vividly than in silence. The spaces between the utterances of Gogo and Didi echo the endless quiet of annihilation Time collapses. Out of its hush there erupts another frenetic conversation, another reason to engage in “relaxations, elevations, elongations.”<sup>25</sup> As the body contorts into the mechanical motions, time flies off, but then returns like a boomerang to the same spot, the same silence, in which nothing happens many times. In Chekhov, on the other hand, we find ourselves in Paul Ricoeur’s “fictive experience of time”<sup>26</sup> that continues beyond telos into the monotony of ordinary sounds and gestures:

SONJA: Poor Uncle Vanya, you are crying . . . (*tearfully*) You’ve had no joy in life, but wait, Uncle Vanya, wait . . . We shall rest . . . (*Embraces him.*) We shall rest!  
(*The watchman taps. Maria Vassilievna makes notes on the margin of her pamphlet, Marina knits her stocking.*)<sup>27</sup>

The tapping of the watchman, the sound of the pen moving across the page, the embrace, the quietness of knitting, all embody time as the time of the subject that remains. The watchman taps, and we know that this is how it will be, from now on, and forever. In these gestures lies the kindness of time as a redeemer—the doggedness of managing to go through it all. We are in the space of work as eternity and body as persistence.

The idea that performance transforms the temporal experience of the audience is nothing new. If this were all we had to challenge the paradigm of theatrical ephemerality, we should admit defeat, for we have yet to remove the vise of time from the throat of a play. The houselights go up, and the audience goes home. Temporal loops or not, eternity in an hour or not, the taxi drives us home, and what remains of a performance is a crumpled program. In exploring the medium of theatre as a mode of becoming, then, it is the end of theatre and its things—actors’ bodies, objects, and elements of design—that need to be retrieved from the trap of linear time and infused with a transformative subjective (and temporal) experience. Otherwise, the end of a show is the end of a show. Seeing eternity in an hour does not make up for being dead for all eternity.

To find performance as a mode of becoming, we have no choice but to look for it in the “very manifestation of life.”<sup>28</sup> To do so, we have to leave the theatre building, for it is only there that a performance begins and ends. Wrought out of stone, with ticket booths and marble foyers, theatre as a cultural edifice offers a testimony to art as a revived corpse. On its stages, performances expire within the linear time, cut off from the modes of their production. However, the premise that time is a continuum inseparable from spatial extension allows us to see that a performance does not stop with the fall of the curtain, but continues in the body and mind of the viewer. If I carry home some remnant of the silence that follows Sonja’s monologue, how does it sound

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1982), 86.

<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 100.

<sup>27</sup> Anton Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya*, trans. Elisabeta V. Fen (London: Penguin, 1954), 245.

<sup>28</sup> I borrow this phrase from Tadeusz Kantor’s antitheatrical poem, “The Questioning of the Artistic Place,” although his placing of performance within the fabric of reality leads to something quite different from what I investigate here. Tadeusz Kantor, *A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944–1990*, ed. and trans. Michal Kobialka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 99.

in my living room? If a bygone performance continues in reality, where do we find it, what does it look like, and what distinguishes it from merely remembering the past?

### Actors in Their Apartments

“From all the crevices in the floor, from all the moldings, from every recess, there grew slim shoots filling the gray air with a scintillating filigree lace of leaves. Around the bed, under the lamp, along the wardrobes, grew clumps of delicate trees. In the rapid process of blossoming, enormous white and pink flowers opened among the leaves.”  
—Bruno Schulz<sup>29</sup>

The actors’ apartment on St. Alban’s was a typical lair of young artists—haphazardly furnished and decorated with things that looked vaguely like art. Besides a sense of cultivated chaos, however, I felt there a certain restlessness in the objects—those on the floor, on the shelves, in the kitchen. They seemed eager to be picked up. Similar to what happened at Monk’s, the kitchen table was transformed into a miniature stage, and its various items—bottles, plates, and spoons—moved about in pursuit of a plot. Under the living room table slept the white rabbit that had performed in the show. A lamp fashioned out of a prop candlestick lit us from above. *machines machines machines machines machines machines machines machines* was there.

The props and bits of scenery strewn around the apartment revealed the show still present in the continuum of what we might call normal life. Their presence among household objects created an impression that the performance continued there in forms similar to the fantastical flowering in Schulz’s abandoned rooms, where memories materialize. The most vivid presence of all, however, was that of the *dramatis personae*, who still lived within the bodies of the two performers. Someone else’s smile lingered behind Geoff’s usual grin; someone else’s eyes looked out from within Quinn’s own. It was uncanny, but not unpleasantly so. Finally, the performers succumbed.

Donning capes made from plastic bags, they introduced themselves as the entrepreneurial globetrotters Bobek and Tomek, describing their peregrinations in Eastern Europe, during which they had acquired several extraordinary machines. These technological marvels (based on the Rube Goldberg idea of outrageously complex mechanisms) aimed at accomplishing simple domestic tasks in complicated ways. One of these, a breakfast helper designed to cut fruit for cereal, stood in the kitchen—a rickety mess of strings and pulleys, resembling a small guillotine, hovering above a banana. We stood before it, riveted by the power of the almost.

As the evening progressed, new dramatic scenes began to appear. Without an extension cord, we could only observe the banana-cutting machine at work by crouching in the corner next to the electrical outlet. The simple task of watching a performance became absurdly complicated, a Rube Goldberg machine for spectating: left hand (A) lands onto a sofa (B), which tugs at neighbor’s coat (C), that inspires its

<sup>29</sup> Bruno Schulz, “The Street of Crocodiles,” in *The Complete Fiction of Bruno Schulz: The Street of Crocodiles, Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* (New York: Walker and Company, 1989), 38.



removal (D), which opens up a seat (E), which in turn frees space by the radiator (F), and so on. The breakfast prop began to malfunction not only as a theatrical artifact, but also as an ordinary kitchen knife (we tried to use its dull blade in earnest), infecting the other utilitarian objects in the room with the virus of inadequacy. I took hold of a railing that came off in my hand. Geoff dropped a book and insisted we pick it up by a rope attached to a stick.

The usual conversation at such gatherings—life in the theatre—changed into discussing life as theatre, as an impossibility that actually happens. We concluded that life resembles a Rube Goldberg machine that goes on interminably but ends abruptly, through a sequence of vaguely related events accompanied by huffing, puffing, and much smoke adding up to something not all together remarkable:

Then we found bits of machines in a dump, but had only 15 minutes to get it because it took us all day to find a car to get to the dump; the large man who ran the dump said that we could have whatever we could carry, but if we took longer than 15 minutes we would be buried forever among the bits and bobs.<sup>30</sup>

The white rabbit awoke just in time. Enchanting us with his aerial jumps and passion for lettuce, the animal created another theatrical scenario, pulling us back into the reality of performance.

### “What’s Up, Doc?”

States observes that animals and children are notorious for upsetting the coherence of theatrical illusion: they come onstage tethered to the real world, allowing for “the upsurge of the real into the magic circle where the conventions of theatricality have assured us that the real has been subdued and transcended.”<sup>31</sup> I will always remember the goldfish that appeared in a student production. I wondered if it had enough oxygen in its bowl, if it were not too hot under the lights, and who would take care of it afterward.

Despite the hold that animals have on the real, during that evening in the apartment the opposite occurred. When **Steve the rabbit** awoke, he did not appear more real than the performative fiction that coalesced around him. Steve functioned not as an “upsurge of the real into the magic circle” but rather as an upsurge of magic into the territory of the real. For the rabbit, living with the actors did not signify his return to an everyday existence outside representation. In the apartment, he continued to play his role in a theatrical fiction; in an ontological sense, Steve stayed in character without any part of him left over for any other use. Sharing his box with his most immediate acting partner, a toy mammoth, Steve resided in the same liminal space inhabited by Pirandello’s six characters who continue acting their parts in a play even as it ceases to be written. Steve in the apartment was the same as Steve on the stage, or Steve anywhere else: the kind of rabbit that, when at home, does not take off his fur to slip into something more comfortable.

And so *machines machines* continued. If in the original performance the rabbit acted out a parable of technological obsolescence and ennui (represented by the mammoth)

<sup>30</sup> Sobelle, 2002.

<sup>31</sup> States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, 34.

encountering the dawn of second innocence (represented by the rabbit himself), in the actors' home he continued to star in the same story. If in the original performance he wanted to escape from his cage (symbolizing entrapment by technology), on St. Alban's Street he also wanted to flee his cage, for (one assumes) similar reasons. That evening, and before, and after, the rabbit performed his part in an archetypal drama of technology versus nature. However, within the theory of theatrical evanescence, Steve-as-performer did not exist at all. And yet, there he was, improvising before us the trick of his existence, living, together with the toy mammoth and the other props, both real and potential, in the undeniably ongoing present.

In the apartment, Steve subsisted on more than lettuce, summoning the cultural body of dramatic actions available to rabbits, something we might find in Barthes's lexicon: rabbit as "a body of practices and techniques."<sup>32</sup> Steve's charisma—his vivid participation in everyday life—had its roots in preexisting dramatic situations, such as appearing out of hats, eating Mr. McGregor's vegetables, one-upping Elmer Fudd. Performance has the power to penetrate to the very core of the real and transform it into the reality of fiction. In the cultural imaginary there exists what we might call a performative a priori—a set of conditions that makes people and phenomena come into the field of our vision from within a preexisting matrix of dramatic scenes. Embedded in its substratum, performance emerges as a field of activity that continues in the everyday. On occasions when we don our capes, we also participate in the performative a priori by doing so in style, using a gesture that belongs to our lexicon—a swirl of motion, and voilà!

Although theatre is arguably the most composite and least containable of arts, its theorists avoid the chaotic processes that surround and sustain it.<sup>33</sup> The everyday performative, and the idiosyncratic artistic routes that go by the name of creativity, rarely enter the theoretical discussion of performance. The messiness of rehearsals, for example, largely goes unnoticed. We focus on the stage, forgetting that even a conventional production gathers around itself an enormously varied body of artifacts that may not end up in the final product, but which nonetheless reveal how this particular stage event came into being. More than in the finished show, the processes of theatricality become visible in various accidental events and discursive/imagistic associations that gather around a performance-in-the-making, and sometimes even become it:

If you would like, I could try to furnish you with a list of some of the things we used for the show:

- one helicopter
- one rabbit
- a woolly mammoth
- one roller-skate
- a toy airplane launcher

<sup>32</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 46.

<sup>33</sup> There are, of course, theoretical systems that would allow performance to function as a limitless, idiosyncratic, and multiépistemic activity. Deleuze and Guattari's particular brand of epistemology (based on the notion of the rhizome) is one of them. Certain forms of phenomenological description (exemplified, for example, by Artaud's account of the Balinese dancers) provide another model. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3–25. Also see Antonin Artaud: *Selected Writings*, "For The Theater and its Double," ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 215–27.

30 feet of clear plastic tubing  
 a small bed  
 five sheets of drywall  
 one miniature policeman  
 one toilet  
 a toy soldier  
 three wooden balls  
 one Venetian blind

Regarded as a process of becoming, performance cares not for the end, but grows through it into other forms of continuance. It transforms the world into a theatre where a show is but one phase in a process that goes on continuously in real life:

some very heavy things  
 two balloons  
 many bananas

When theatre functions only as an organizing force, creating a matrix of predictable causes and effects, it tolls its own vanishing. After all, shows end. Performance, however, never does, for it unfolds in the world where the performative abides in everyday reality, where white rabbits live as fictions, and Rube Goldberg helps with breakfast. As a rhizomatic proliferation, performance sustains culture at its broadest, most vital echelon, dwelling in the very essence of reality where it assumes an ontological priority over the real:

58 hinges  
 500 screws  
 25 eyelets<sup>34</sup>

### A Rabbit and the Machine

“O Dear! O Dear! I shall be too late!”  
 —Lewis Carroll<sup>35</sup>

The mechanisms designed by Rube Goldberg were partly organic and partly manmade: woodpeckers, chipmunks, owls, and other creatures moved strings and pulleys. As a metaphor for performance, a machine run by a rabbit illuminates the Goldbergian *techné* of the theatre.

In the opening sequence of the film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, Roger participates in an absurd chain of events unleashed by Baby Herman, who reaches for a cookie jar on top of the refrigerator and manages to ignite an inferno. Roger begins his mission of rescuing the baby by tripping over a rolling pin (A), then getting baked in an oven (B), electrocuted (C), impaled by knives (D), and generally battered (E). Caught in a raging Goldbergian machine that annexes the everyday kitchen, Roger inhabits a space of near disaster. The performative nature of this sequence comes into full view when we realize that all this uproar takes place on a movie set. The filming ends abruptly when the rabbit forgets to see stars after the refrigerator lands on his head, and sees birds

<sup>34</sup> The entire list is taken from Sobelle, 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (Dorking: Templar Books, 2002), 9.

instead. Baby Herman, who a moment ago cooed melodiously, begins to swear and walks off the set shouting, "Until you people get it right, I will be in my trailer."<sup>36</sup> Just like the spectacle of *machines machines*, this cinematic interlude reveals how performance subsists in the seams of reality as the ur-drama that goes on when we try to do anything at all. Performance comes into being not in the smooth accomplishment of tasks, but in the often absurd struggle with the resistance of matter.

An afternoon in a scene shop makes this clear: in order to make snow fall onstage, for example, one needs to buy lots of feathers (A), return them to the store because they are too big (B), cut up sheets of white paper into small pieces (C), put them in a box (D), suspend the box on a grid (E), attach it to the pulley (F), etc., only to have it fall down in one awkward clump. After many trials, however, the audience sees a flurry of snowflakes gracefully descending on the roof of the castle. Rabbits and Rube Goldberg capture the inventive nature of performance where the impossible happens, even though, as one frequently hears from technical directors, it can't be done.

Performance proves that it can indeed be done, because it never surrenders its connection to life, remaining in the apartment, rooted in the regular activities of life. In the spaces that we inhabit and know intimately (the living room, the office, the car), technology mediates our every move. As in Roger's kitchen, these places are inherently of the theatre; much of the time, we can't believe what's happening. When we look for lost keys, burn our dinner, or crash into a garage door, our engagement with technology slips into farce, tragedy, or a combination of both. In this sense, performance remains embedded in the very fabric of cultural *poesis*, in the ordinary processes of doing things. In the actors' apartment, peeling bananas and preparing breakfast are profoundly affected by the awareness that machines have a life of their own, and that technology generates sites of its own parody. Wherever rabbits run into machines and other objects—in rehearsal rooms, prop closets, scene shops, kitchens, warehouses, bars—a performance is ready to take place. The same process continues when we create a show, or go to see one, eliciting the pejorative or complimentary response: "How on earth . . . ?"

This question is worth asking in the context of kitchens and theatres, for these are places of crisis where technology becomes, as Heidegger puts it, "unconcealed." There, technology functions as the material expression of thought: "Techne is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. Techne belongs to bringing forth, to *poesis*."<sup>37</sup> This bringing forth unfolds a myriad of scenes. The show, like life, goes on.

Applied to the theatre, the metaphor of a Rube Goldberg machine run by a rabbit counters the paradigm of performance as disappearance. The rabbit and the machine replace the notion of theatrical ephemerality with the notion that performance reveals the ongoing drama of everyday *techne*.

In the theatre, where shows begin and end, the curtains close because they open. In the realm of performance, however, even if (A) leads to (B), it does so according to an entirely different temporal and causal chain. A rabbit brings down the curtain not to

<sup>36</sup> *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* Directed by Robert Zemeckis. Burbank: Touchstone Video, 1997.

<sup>37</sup> Heidegger, "Question," 318.

signal the end of the show (A), but to have a mailbox drop onto a stage (B), out of which he takes a letter (C), which reads: "Where everything that presences exhibits itself in the light of cause and effect coherence, even God can lose all that is exalted and holy—the mysteriousness of his distance."<sup>38</sup> In the mysterious incoherence between the what and the how, performance continues.

### Epilogue

"I'll bequeath no goods to you when I am dead."  
—Tudor Arghezi<sup>39</sup>

By running through walls, adopting disguises, improvising escapes from the inescapable, Bugs Bunny always manages to outsmart Elmer Fudd. As a master of cunning, Bugs does what a performance does, come up with ingenious ideas of how not to die:

We had a long rolling conveyer belt that we could fly in and out, on which I would roll Quinn's character, Rabbit Face, at great speed through a small wooden passageway. But we didn't really rehearse this but once and so, during the performance, I really sent him flying and at the last minute he raised his head, smacking it against a wooden beam, which sent him ricocheting back onto the stage. I remember seeing the audience wince. I didn't realize what happened, so I sent him a second time, with force. I escaped through the hatch and saw him roll towards me, white as sheet, saying that he thought he might vomit if we continued, and that he was having trouble feeling his legs. We called an ambulance and the doctors made their way through the strings and wires to the backstage where Quinn lay quivering in warm milk, orange juice and sweat, wearing his costume—a plastic bag and some pants. They asked him what had happened and he started to explain the dramatic structure of the piece (this had little to do with a head injury by the way . . .). They strapped him to a board and took him to ER where he lay next to a screaming man for a few hours. By then, Quinn was all right. He did the rest of the run with a neck brace, which actually improved his character. We sold out the run, extended it a week, sold that one too, and now we are planning the remount.<sup>40</sup>

As I write this, a smile grins at me from the TV screen—not that of a Cheshire cat, but of our homegrown tyrant.<sup>41</sup> Surrounded as we are by war drums, it seems important to keep death and vanishing out of the theatre, to see if more cunning and perspicacious forms of life can develop there, and outwit this particularly grim reaper. Bugs Bunny manages to get the better of Elmer Fudd by being an actor. As a performer and director of stupendous theatrical machinations, he remains on top of an illusion, because he knows how to create it. Since at present we live under the control of a well-armed Elmer Fudd without his cuteness and regrets, we should cultivate prestidigitation and subterfuge. To do that we might need:

one plastic Jesus  
five quarts of water  
one quart of orange juice

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>39</sup> Tudor Arghezi, "Testament," in *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, ed. Carolyn Forché (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1993), 408.

<sup>40</sup> Sobelle, 2002.

<sup>41</sup> I am writing this on 3 November 2004, the day after the presidential election.

one quart of milk  
19 pulleys  
one painting of a volcano<sup>42</sup>

In the episode *Presto-O, Change-O*, Bugs makes himself appear and disappear as part of a magic act, to the applause of his own disembodied white gloves. As a performer, he transforms disappearance *ad nihilo* into creation *ex nihilo*, converting transience into becoming. He manages to do so in the performative a priori, donning a cape with style. So understood, performance is a reverse danse macabre during which it is the rabbit who dances with the dead, and the resurrection of Jesus occurs in orange juice, plastic, water, and milk. To die is easy. To make something happen out of nothing, or very little, takes practice and much training in the art of the performative. Bugs Bunny pulls himself by his own rabbit ears out of the void. It is time to learn how on earth he does it.

<sup>42</sup> Sobelle, 2002.