

Gray zone and skilled co-presence

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Abstract

Il mio obiettivo è quello di estendere la nozione di “gray zone,” presentata da Claire Bishop nel suo saggio del 2018, *Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone*, attraverso quella di “skilled intentionality,” proposta da Erik Rietveld e colleghi (Rietveld, Denys, Van Westen, 2018) nel campo delle scienze cognitive incarnate. A partire quindi da un approccio ecologico-enattivo alla cognizione, presenterò la nozione di “skilled co-presence” mediante la quale provo a gettare luce sul modo in cui possiamo estendere le nostre abilità ibridandoci con gli altri, con i materiali e le tecnologie. Per fare questo articolerò la mia riflessione a partire da ciò che Erika Fisher-Lichte definisce “feedback di loop autopoietico” (Fisher-Lichte, 2008). La proposta di Rietveld e colleghi ruota attorno all'arricchimento della nozione di affordance (Gibson 1979, Rietveld, Kiverstein 2014), intesa come relazione tra un aspetto dell'ambiente sociomateriale e le abilità disponibili in una forma di vita. Nuove possibilità emergono quando aspetti dell'ambiente materiale vengono colti da abilità solitamente utilizzate in altre pratiche. Ritengo che in occasione del prodursi di una “gray zone” sia possibile osservare, in modo paradigmatico, come possano sorgere nuove abilità grazie alla messa in comune ed alla fertilizzazione incrociata.

My aim is to extend the notion of “gray zone,” presented by Claire Bishop in her 2018 essay, *Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone*, through that of “skilled intentionality,” proposed by Erik Rietveld and colleagues (Rietveld, Denys, Van Westen, 2018) in the field of embodied cognitive science. Starting, thus, from an ecological-enactive approach to cognition, I will present the notion of “skilled co-presence” through which I try to shed light on how we are able to extend our abilities by hybridizing with others, materials, and technologies. To do this I will articulate my reflection from what Erika Fisher-Lichte calls “autopoietic loop feedback” (Fisher-Lichte, 2008). Rietveld and colleagues' proposal revolves around the enrichment of the notion of affordance (Gibson 1979, Rietveld, Kiverstein 2014), understood as the relationship between an aspect of the sociomaterial environment and the abilities available in a form of life. New affordances emerge when aspects of the material environment are captured by skills usually used in other practices. I believe that when a “gray zone” is produced, it is possible to observe, in a paradigmatic way, how new abilities can arise through pooling and cross-fertilization.

Parole chiave/Key Words

Skilled-co presence; gray zone; affordances; performance art; openness.

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Introducing varieties of presence

The American philosopher Alva Noë asks how it is possible that if we are shown a tomato we are able to perceive it as a whole – it is present to us – although the backside is not exposed to our sense organs. The answer he comes to is that we can do this since our perception rests on the fact that we are able to move around it. Operating on this argumentative level then I can explain, for example, how my mother who lives in a different city from mine can be present to me right now: this is because I possess the skill acquired within a shared practice that allows me to use the technology encapsulated in my smartphone. I can access the back of the tomato and my mother who lives far away in different ways: these are “varieties of presence” (Noë, 2012) that differ in quantity and not in quality. In this sense, presence is not something given to us for free but an "achievement" that can be accomplished with effort through the expert use of multiple skills and technologies that allow you to "access" what is there to make it "available" to you.

The front of a tomato; the back of it; the space behind my head; the room next door; the Eiffel Tower; my mother—these are all present insofar as they are all available to me. Depending on where they are located in space and time, the nature of my access to them varies. To differences in varieties of access there correspond differences in varieties of presence. We only have access to what there is. But not everything is accessible. What constrains access, and so presence, is what we can do— know-how and skill. The meaning of the writing on the wall is available to me if I can read the language in which it is written; the back of the apple is present to me visually from here if I can probe it (say, by walking around to the other side of the apple) (Noë, 2012, p.32).

Performance art, especially from the emersion of the so-called “gray zone,” can open privileged spaces for understanding how we “collectively access” the objects of our attention, and how we “walk around” it thanks to the rich repertoire of abilities and tools we have at our disposal in our form of life. The notion of gray zone , as I will specify in the development of this article, was proposed by the English art historian Claire Bishop in her 2018 essay *Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone* where, tracing the path that has led the performing arts usually presented in the context of sperimental theaters –black box– to operate within museum venues –white cube– over the past fifteen years or so, she sheds light on the new space –gray zone– that has resulted from the encounter of different attentional ecologies characterized by a peculiar spectatorial posture. Bishop analyzes the gray zone’s specific aspects that, in a nutshell, under the drive of portable technological devices, would produce the questioning of

spectatorial conventions thus giving rise to the unfolding of an unfocused but fluctuating attentional process that is articulated on different levels that usually –at least since the Wagnerian reform – are not fostered in the performing arts. This aspect far from being analyzed as problematic is nothing more than the emergence of creative attentional processes that have been restricted over the past centuries.

Thanks to the extension of this notion that I will develop in this paper, it will be clear that in the spaces of suspension and negotiation opened by the gray zone we can grasp how the emergence of the object of shared attention is the result of a complex choreography: multiple abilities are articulated on different temporal scales within a rich cognitive ecology. Moreover, as I will try to highlight, this space is precisely the space of reciprocal education and cross-fertilization, where we can potentially pool our abilities. Thus, coming back to Noë's quote, the American philosopher says that «What constrains access, and so presence, is what we can do —know-how and skill»; I will try to answer to the question that could sound like: what can we do in the mixed and simultaneous aesthetic experience typical of the gray zone in which different varieties of presence are at play? As it will be clear, no specific expertise is created but a creatively promising capacity is trained, which consists of “openness to others and to things” in ways not predetermined by the practice in which we are involved, which means widening openness to the multiplicity of possibilities not predefined by preestablished goals. This openness – as we will see– would allow rich exchanges and possibilities for “educating each other” because it is not exclusively selectively oriented on the basis of practices and on the basis of one's personal history of interactions with one's surroundings. I will consider the so-called gray zone as the place where to redefine the edges of collective openness to environmental possibilities. Crucially, this reshaping involves being able to grasp aspects of our surroundings in ways we were previously precluded from doing: augmenting the repertoire of affordances we can gather. This is precisely we can do: open ourselves up to the world in unconventional ways through the presence – in its many varieties – of others and catch ourselves in this openness. Ultimately, inhabiting a gray zone brings us to the insight that the construction of perception we collectively work on is fragile and can be defined and enriched on temporal planes that extend beyond our personal contact's style and current experience.

Although I am aware that this proposal of mine fits into the rich debate that has developed since the 1990s of the last century with respect to the so-called “liveness” (See Phelan

1994, Auslander 1999, Fischer-Lichte 2008, Blau 2002, Van Es 2017) that has returned powerfully to the center of attention in the COVID-19 period (See Gemini 2020, Capece 2021, Gemini, Brilli, Giuliani 2021) my exploration is first and foremost philosophical and aims to consider performance art first and foremost as a valuable and never ancillary ally in developing a more general reflection on “how we collectively open ourselves to the world,” the possibilities of modifying that openness and thus inventing new ways of living together.

My purpose is thus limited in an attempt to extend the notion of “gray zone,” presented by Claire Bishop through that of “skilled intentionality” proposed by Erik Rietveld and colleagues in the field of embodied cognitive science. In this sense, starting from an ecological-enactive approach to cognition, I will try to develop a more general reflection on the concept of “skilled co-presence” that I am going to probe and propose here. My philosophical exploration takes a cue from the reflection of theorist Erika Fisher-Lichte, according to whom the performative event is produced through an “autopoietic feedback loop” in which the co-presence of actors and spectators is fundamental.

Skilled Intentionality Framework

In the field of cognitive science, a paradigm shift has been taking place since the 1990s. In contrast to classical cognitivism, which placed the computer metaphor at the center of its approach, today, in accordance with the now famous 4Es acronym, the mind is understood as embodied, extended, enactive, and embedded. Although there are many similarities in the diverse landscape of E approaches to cognition, there are just as many divergences. A great effort is being made to propose a unified cognitive framework. One of the most promising proposals that aims to account for the fact that the individual “brings forth” his or her own existence but without losing sight of the cognitive value of the sociomaterial environment is the ecological-enactive approach proposed by Rietveld and colleagues, who starting with the seminal essay *A Rich Landscape of Affordances* published in 2014 by Erik Rietveld and Julian Kiverstein proposed an extension of the Gibsonian notion of affordance. This account providing an articulated understanding of the relational nature of affordances allows us to investigate, without resorting to «mysterious internal resources» (Rietveld-Kiverstein 2014, p. 327), how new ways of extending our openness to our surroundings emerge. In this sense, it will be possible not only to investigate «how broad is the class of affordances we can perceive»

(Rietveld-Kiverstein 2014, p. 325) but also, crucially, to explore how we can extend that class. Through the cue provided to me by performance art, I will try to investigate how we work together to open ourselves to the world.

Coined by the American psychologist James Gibson, the notion of affordance is complex and controversial, but it is possible to formulate a basic definition on which there is general agreement: an affordance constitutes a possibility for action provided to the animal by the environment – by substances, surfaces, objects and other living creatures (See Chemero 2009, Heft 2001, Reed 1996). However, understanding it as has usually been done, as a possibility of action, runs the risk of ignoring the complexity of the Gibsonian notion and failing to account for «the entire realm of social meaning» (Gibson 1979/1986, pp.127-128). The solution suggested by Rietveld and Kiverstein that tries to do justice to the variety of practices available to our species, is to situate the notion of affordance in the Wittgensteinian notion of form of life (*Lebensformen*). The definition Rietveld and Kiverstein come at is as follows: affordances are relationships between aspects of the sociomaterial environment and the abilities available in a life form. For humans, abilities are gained through a history of interactions in sociocultural practices, meaning that we learn to act appropriately according to the norms of context-sensitive practices. Anthropologist Tim Ingold's description of how the weaverbird builds its nest may be useful in order to account for what is meant here by “abilities.” Much like the human string bag maker, the weaverbird's abilities are developed through an active exploration of the possibilities offered by its surroundings – which is linked to the animal's choice of materials and bodily capabilities. Crucially, as Ingold points out, successful nesting is linked first and foremost to the animal's ability to regulate its movements in relation to the evolving shape of its construction (See Ingold 2000/2010, p. 358). Man, like the weaverbird, coordinate their movements with the material aspects of sociomaterial environment. Thus, we learn to identify relevant affordances with respect to our engagements related to a particular practice. In this sense, through training, an architect, for example, can respond to environmental solicitations differently from someone who has not been trained to recognize certain sociomaterial invitations. In the process of “education of attention” (Gibson 1979/1986, p.254) the novice is subject to normative evaluation based on his or her engagement in a specific situation. Acting properly, to possess a skill, then requires the ability to be in “correspondence” (See Ingold 2013) with both others and material things. Skillful agents, through their engagement in shared practices, have acquired abilities by

which they are able to “cooperate” with the sociomaterial environment. What matters then for successful coordination is the ability to adapt to a sociocultural practice but also to the specific details of the particular situation.

This relational definition of affordance comprehends two dimensions: 1) the form of life in which individuals have the potential to engage skillfully with affordances; 2) the actual ability of a particular individual to use affordances. In this way, crucially for my reflection, the existence of an affordance is not made to depend on an individual's current engagement with it, but rather its existence is relative to a broader form of life. Thus, it is possible to create or collect new affordances on the basis of abilities and possibilities already available in various practices, exploiting «the rich potentialities the environment already offers, for instance by making new combinations» (Rietveld, Kiverstein 2014 p.338). In this sense, the discovery of new affordances or the collection of unconventional ones can be fostered by stimulating the application of existing abilities to different aspects of the environment, that is a process of cross-fertilization.

Each individual, based on the process of “education of attention” and his or her own history of interactions with the sociomaterial environment, is selectively open to the field of affordances that constitutes a portion of the rich landscape available to the life form. In this sense, we speak of “skilled intentionality” (See Rietveld, Denys, Van Westen, 2018). Following this line of reasoning, the so-called “higher” cognitive capacities – imagination, dealing with absent object, memory, planning – are rather to be understood in terms of «skillful activities in practices and in terms of the material resources exploited in those practices» (Rietveld, Kiverstein 2014, p. 346). In a nutshell, the proposal is to consider human activities traditionally characterized as “higher” cognition in terms of engagement with affordances instead of in terms of intimate and idiosyncratic confabulation with supposed internal entities.

In everyday life, we continually adapt to various contexts by demonstrating that we are able to respond to the normative demands of specific situations as they unfold. Expert agents can also act appropriately on larger time scales and for those imaginative practices. If situated activity is explained in terms of responsiveness to relevant affordances on a short time scale, the same can be done in reference to affordances that unfold on much larger time scales—such as those imaginative activities related to the performing arts that are given over time and, as we shall see, are also articulated on different timescales. The difference between

anticipation of large-scale affordances and responsiveness to small-scale inviting affordances is a matter of degree, not type.

My point is that a gray zone, as I will try to elaborate in the next section, “puts on display” (Noë 2015) the way we attune on different time scales in order to focus the object of our attention: in a given context in which the object of our attention is not predetermined, it is possible for each person to offer an invitation to each other – current or remote – to collectively determine imaginatively – that is, on an extended temporal plane in which a situation is developed on the basis of multiple activities – the object of shared attention. In a given context, exemplified here by the emergence of the gray zone, in which one can be present through multiple abilities – according to a wide range of varieties of presence – it is possible to observe what I term “skilled co-presence,” that is, a presence that is given on multiple temporal planes to configure an event that is not only spent in the simple space-time of situated occurrence but welcomes bits of presence embedded in shared unfolding practices.

Gray zones and education of attention

As mentioned in the opening of this paper, the British art historian Claire Bishop in her 2018 essay *Black Box, White Cube Gray Zone* analyzes the movement of performing arts from the black box of experimental theater to the white cube of museum space over the past 15 years. This shift causes a crisis in the behavioral patterns at stake within museums by visitors giving rise to what she calls a gray zone.

When dance is inserted into an exhibition the viewing conventions of both the black box and the white cube are ruptured: a single-point perspective (seating in the theater, standing in front of a work) is replaced by multi-perspectivalism and the absence of an ideal viewing position. [...] Because of the spectator’s undefined position, the protocols surrounding audience behavior are less stable and more open to improvisation (Bishop 2018, p.31).

Bishop focuses on the kind of hybrid performance that she calls “dance exhibition,” a paradigmatic gray zone, where audience attention is oriented not exclusively towards the performance:

In these works, audience attention is oriented towards the performance, but not exclusively; we participate in a collective experience and its documentation, but selectively turn away from the performers to converse with our friends, virtually or in real life. [...] these works only externalize and make literal the mental drift that occurs whenever we watch any performance. Attention exists on a continuum of other states not necessarily attached to the optical, including trance, reverie, daydream, hypnosis,

meditation, and dissociation. These internal states were once thought essential to creativity, but today tend to be devalued as nonproductive time (Bishop, 2018, p.38).

A peculiar feature of the gray zone is the pervasiveness of digital devices, the unregulated use of smartphones that can be employed by the spectators during a performance to surf on the internet, make a call, share the experience in different ways, capture an image, and perhaps send it or post it on a social network— a hybrid public-private platform. As Bishop foregrounds, a gray zone is precisely this hybrid public-private space. The possibility of developing one's experience in non-normalized ways by taking advantage of technologies that re-fract attentional pathways forms the core of Bishop's reflection.

Having broadly outlined, for the purposes of my reflection, the English art historian's position, I now move on, also using her examples and insights, to extend her notion by introducing some aspects such as the ability to educate one another, to open oneself to things and others in unconventional ways, and that of cross-fertilizing one's skills.

An example of a hybrid performance that Bishop uses as a paradigm of the gray zone, is Anne Imhof's *Faust* presented in 2017 in the German Pavilion at the International Art Exhibition-La Biennale di Venezia. On that occasion, Anne Imhof designs her work in such a way that the viewer, upon entering the space in the Giardini, would find himself involved in an action already in progress – somehow this highlights that we access the object of our experience never first, we have been preceded, and this has already defined sociomaterial terms from which to start our never solitary exploration. Once inside the space it is not immediately clear the distinction between who is performing and who is watching the performance. The object of attention has to be negotiated with the performers and other visitors and thus could only be defined by active engagement: it is clearly an “achievement” that could be accomplished on different levels, through multiple skills and shared practices. As mentioned above, Bishop suggests that a gray zone is a public-private hybrid space, which could recall a social network that we can access at any time from our mobile devices. *Faust* seems to bring out just such a public-private dimension: the glass walls against which the performers press their bodies and under which they refuge are reminiscent of a touch screen, as Bishop notes. In practice, upon entering the exhibition space, the viewer is confronted with multiple performative actions that are developing simultaneously. Each visitor is then called upon to define his or her own attentional path according to his or her own interests and in ways and with

means that he or she prefers: standing, sitting on the floor, filming with a cell phone, photographing. In this way, those who enter find themselves in a space where attempts to "access" what Imhof proposes are already underway; one is preceded by different modes of contact with the object of shared perception, which in turn constitute a further invitation – layering on the original artistic proposal – to which one can respond depending on one's story of interactions with the sociomaterial environment, such as, for example, being scandalized by the massive use of a cell phone, using the cell phone in our turn to take pictures, focusing on an action by being drawn to a huddle of people or perhaps paving a lonely road, being ourselves the first to establish a new style of access– this is always possible but my interest here is focused primarily on the normative validity of others. What is experienced here is first and foremost being faced with styles of access that predetermine a possible attentional path.

The fact that the object of our perception is always already defined in advance of our actual focus on it is the theme, subterranean, that characterizes the activities in which we find ourselves engaged during the long time spent in line to enter the Pavilion. In this long waiting period, we find ourselves in the position of calling upon skills that we will shortly thereafter use as participants in the performance at the designated venue; that is, starting from a stalemate that is not perfectly bounded by particular norms, one will begin to experience the phenomenology of skilled co-presence by engaging in activities that, having *Faust* as their pivot, are articulated on different time-scales: consult online sites to read reviews of the performance, look at photos of the performance or videos on YouTube, write messages on WhatsApp, post some pictures – Dobermann dogs at the entrance – on Facebook and Instagram, simply observe others, converse with those in line, listen to music, eat something, entertain oneself in unplanned ways with strangers. In this way it is possible to experience different kinds of contact with the world around us. Such multiple styles of contact, in a situation of apparent boredom – never underestimate the creative potential of boredom (See Noë 2015) – where time is unstructured, can potentially give rise to heterogeneous and perhaps not necessarily "appropriate" or conventional activities – I have personally witnessed groups of people dancing to the sound of a portable speaker while standing in line or throwing a ball from one end to the other; crucially their abilities pose themselves from the outset as possibilities that I can welcome, they are invitations that, depending on my sensory-motor skills and abilities acquired over time and personal interests, I may or may not accept. Right from the outset, in minimal form, the fact emerges that it is always possible to engage collectively, through cross-

fertilization, in an unconventional reconfiguration of a shared space. It is precisely this richness of possibility that characterizes the gray zone in which skilled co-presence emerges to the fore. In accordance with my extension of the notion, in a gray zone, we are not called upon to do anything in particular, and this relieves us of habitual and predetermined activities and thus opens us to the possibility of welcoming others – the main object of our attention – as invitations to action in a way that usually does not emerge so powerfully in everyday life when we are caught up in our busy schedules. This is precisely what arises in my view in the gray zone: invitations that can open us up to activities that take place on different time scales– catching a ball on the fly, pinning thoughts on our cell phone or using it to share a photo on a social network, writing a chat message – emerge to the fore as no predetermined practice governs our possible choices. It is precisely this that constitutes the condition, as we shall see, of cross-fertilization.

To explore further what I mean by gray zone it may be helpful to refer to durational forms of dance. I'm thinking of a work by Hassabi, *TOGETHER*, viewed in Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome in 2019. This example, I would say, gives a more minimal form of gray zone but, at the same time, provides a powerful image of a collective body that takes literally shape when we meet with each other. In *TOGETHER*, as seen in Rome, two performers coming from opposite sides of the gallery in a slow motion, meet in the center of the space and, after almost screwing on each other, then leave to continue in the two opposite directions. When they meet in the center and slowly rotate around each other, the viewer may be invited to grasp the image that consists of a kind of fascinating multi-headed, multi-limbed monster. The audience is confronted with a body that is constantly transforming. What is interesting is that in the unfolding of this slow-motion movement, it may happen that viewers look around, thus floating their attention from smartphones, to others, to physical space. The others – live or remote – and the space are illuminated as well as the performers and thus completely available to the audience's attention. In this way, *TOGETHER* removes the viewer from the tendency to focus exclusively on one object – in this case, bodies in motion – and opens the spectator to the observation of what constitute the sociomaterial constraints of this experience, which are the presence of others and the possibility of negotiating on different time scales the object of shared attention. The composite and changing body of performers is presented in the form of a relationship that intertwines and then dissolves. This harks back to the activity in which each is called to engage in a gray zone: mixing, pooling and open to others and things. Hassabi stages not only the encounter

between two individuals, but also the encounter between spectators (present or remote), who sooner or later will be forced to meet. We are all “together.”

In a gray zone we can observe how the unconventional reconfiguration of a shared space emerges. One last emblematic example. I took part as a spectator in the *Faust* performance at the Biennale. While I was engaged in figuring out the meaning of a stage action involving a performer playing a guitar, a boy right next to me began to dance. His dance I can understand as a way to educate my attention. In that way that boy led me to be solicited by an affordance that until then was not available in my field. The performer's action, his musical production, thus invited me not only to reflect but also to dance. Although I did not start dancing, this invitation allowed me to grasp myself as open to new possibilities. To be open to new possibilities, means to be open to a different way of living "together." In a gray zone we are, real or remote opportunities for mutual action.

I intend to particularly emphasize here that a gray zone can be seen as a place of education of attention on multiple time scales where we educate each other, catch each other in the act of doing so, access new skills, and observe how we let the object of our attention emerge through different practices. As seen, an affordance is a relation between an aspect of the sociomaterial environment and the ability available in a form of life. In acquiring a skill we learn which places in the environment to find affordances relevant to our concerns and thus to which aspects of the surroundings to pay attention. In the process of education of attention, the novice is brought to a selected aspect of the environment that is significant to the practice in which he is being guided. In a nutshell, the subject learns to selectively grasp some aspects of the environment while ignoring others. Of the rich landscape of affordances, only some are solicitations, most will be irrelevant to the agent. The affordances on which we are normally inclined to act are those relevant to our concerns, emerging to the foreground because we might improve our grip on the situation through them.

As already seen in the above examples, in the gray zone, since the object of our attention is not predetermined, when someone engages in a practice, he or she structures the sociomaterial environment to invite further activities. The other participants may or may not grasp his “longitudinal path” (Ingold 2017, pp.25,26). Every unfolding activity enacted in the gray zone is potentially a way of mutually altering the field of affordances. Anyone can offer a possibility to act – on different timescales – or can embody a solicitation by opening the field of affordances of each

other. Dwelling in a gray zone, as anticipated, thus allows us to catch ourselves in the condition of potentially educating each other, to engage collectively in the focusing of the object of our attention, and allows us to grasp how, when engaged in a given practice, a portion of the socio-material environment emerges that through the practice itself we are selecting, and also allows us, as I will mention in a moment, a cross-fertilization of our abilities.

If the gray zone is the space in which it is possible to educate each other, then the dynamic image of the object of our perception turns out to be the result of a transition between one practice and another, in what should be understood as a collective choreography of skills; what we see is defined by the practice in which we are engaged, and the presence of what is there is fragile and can recede, sinking, blur to one side, become black and white, be more or less in focus based on our collective and evolving skills.

In other words, if the education of attention takes place through the introduction of a novice to a determinate practice, in a gray zone we educate each other, not only with respect to determinate practices, but precisely with respect to the possibility of being educated, that is, we engage with the ways in which we are usually introduced to the practices in use by which we are led to identify certain environmental aspects as relevant rather than others: we are introduced to a style of coupling, which involves a view of the world with the related technologies that frame it and at the same time observing and embodying the processes that lead to this outcome. We access different practices and in doing so experience the visions that these open up. Inhabiting the gray zone allows us to grasp ourselves as potentially open to a dynamic and changing configuration of a worldview that is always shared.

The fact that there are no ready-made practices or skills to be put to work in the gray zone means that it is possible to experiment with new ones; it promotes cross-fertilization, and thus allows new affordances to emerge, that is, it allows one to see what was not seen before.

Skilled co-presence and cross-fertilization

The dynamic reconfiguration of the object of collective attention in the space opened up by a gray zone highlights how, on the basis of skilled co-presence, it is always possible to foster cross-fertilization.

Cross-fertilization of our skills occurs when, by introducing into an already given practice the skill acquired in another completely heterogeneous one, new and unconventional skills emerge. What is at issue here is nothing more than a way of becoming infected on different timescales.

I use the term “infection” from the cue provided by the way the theatrical experience has been described over the centuries. I refer, following Fisher-Lichte, specifically to the debates conducted by the Church Fathers and the *Querelle de la moralité du théâtre* in the seventeenth century, particularly in reference to bodily presence in the theatrical events in which the proximity and exchange of moods, typical of this art form, were considered highly contagious, the cause of uncontrolled transformations and loss of identity.

By “infection,” in particular, I am referring to those varieties of contagion that occur not only in the sense of bodily contact due to the actual presence of others, but also as the possibility of mutual education through shared practices, that is, on a plane that is not simply at the level of the body, but that runs through it from side to side which is that of skilled-co presence. Here we can infect each other: cross-fertilization is installed at the level of practices. Skilled co-presence, in this sense, constitutes the condition of being infected; “infection” means cross-fertilize our abilities.

According to Fisher-Lichte, co-presence and contact are the possibility of infection that characterizes the indeterminacy of a performance. The concept of skilled co-presence grafts onto the German scholar's concept of co-presence and, in some ways, tries to enrich it. To fine-tune what I mean I must necessarily refer to what Fisher-Lichte calls the “autopoietic feedback loop.”

With “autopoietic feedback loop,” Fisher-Lichte defines the «self-referential, autopoietic system enabling a fundamentally open, unpredictable process» (Fisher-Lichte, 2008, p.39). This notion has been developed from that of *autopoiesis* – from the Greek *αὐτο-* (self) self, and *ποίησις* (poiesis) creation, production–, proposed by Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela against the backdrop of the neo-cybernetic turn and which today constitutes a key term precisely in enactivism belonging to the 4E family of embodied cognition. The notion was introduced to refer to the self-producing operations typical of living systems. Unlike all other kinds of machines that produce something other than themselves, autopoietic systems are simultaneously producers and products, autonomous systems that survive by self-generation. According to Fisher-Lichte, the autopoietic feedback loop works as a self-organizing system within which new unplanned elements are continuously integrated and emerge from time to time. It is essentially constituted by the actions and reactions of the participants in the event, and, although it is precisely performance art that thematizes it, it is present in a minimal form in every spectacular event, even the most formalized: [...] the performance brings forth the spectators and actors. Through

their actions and behavior, the actors and spectators constitute elements of the feedback loop, which in turn generates the performance itself (Fisher-Lichte 2008, p.50).

I suggest that, on the occasion of the emergence of a gray zone, the autopoietic feedback loop that Fisher-Lichte talks about, develops through sociomaterial aspects of our environment that are not – necessarily – currently present. In this sense, the repertoire of invitations, opportunities and possibilities for action constitutes an extremely rich landscape of affordances ready to be harvested on the basis of available skills. The autopoietic feedback loop emerges thanks to what is there and on the basis of available skills and relative tools by which we can “walk around” what is there in order to focus it collectively. I propose, thus, to introduce the relational nature of the affordance, intended as a relation between an aspect of our sociomaterial environment and abilities available in our form of life, in the core of Fisher-Lichte’s notion. It is precisely in this sense that I speak of skilled co-presence. The gray zone, as focused by Bishop, presents itself as that exemplary space in which skilled co-presence can be observed at work.

If we adopt this angle of observation, the capacity for contagion and thus cross-fertilization in a gray-zone multiplies exponentially on different planes and timescales.

What I tried to do, actually, was to simply shift the plane of reasoning in such a way as to emphasize the importance of skills and practices in focusing on the collective object of our attention, its negotiation and dynamic configuration. In this attempt of mine I obviously do not underdetermine the role of the body, which, in training practices and in the history of contacts with the surrounding environment, is sensitized to aspects relevant to the practice itself: the practice goes through the body and directs it.

Cross-fertilization therefore constitutes an unusual insertion, a deviation of a practice, a malfunction, a monstrous excrescence or simply an infection that opens holes or burrows (Ianniello-Habets 2023), produces burns on the surface of shared perception. Cross-fertilization thus takes on a relevant importance for the questioning of the very practices in which we are engaged and the questioning therefore of the aspects of the sociomaterial environment that these allow us to bring out; this means questioning what we collectively are able to perceive.

How wide is the range of affordances that we can perceive? How far can we expand it? In what ways can we enrich our collective view of the world? It seems fair to end this reflection with a long series of questions.

Based on what I have tried to focus on here, what I believe is that the infection that spreads on different timescale, typical of the skilled-co presence, to which we exemplarily expose ourselves in the gray zone, can foster the emergence of incredibly varied, unorthodox, and completely out of the ordinary possibilities that not only allow us to open ourselves to unusual opportunities for action but to grasp ourselves as potentially open to things and others. So, what can we do in a gray zone? I could say: train our ability to cross-fertilize and to be open that goes hand in hand with an awareness of our limited current contact. I believe that the gray zone can be seen as that laboratory in which to observe the emergence of collectively constituted images of the world, dynamic and wonderfully fragile images.

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Biografia dell'autore/ Author's biography

Antonio Ianniello è un artista performativo, drammaturgo e ricercatore. È nato a Salerno (Italia) nel 1979 e si è trasferito a Roma, dove risiede. Ha frequentato l'Accademia Nazionale d'Arte Drammatica "Silvio D'Amico" e si è laureato in filosofia all'Università "La Sapienza" di Roma dove ha concluso un dottorato di ricerca sull'approccio ecologico-enattivo alle pratiche artistiche. Il suo interesse è rivolto a quelle che definisce pratiche mostruose, ovvero pratiche completamente fuori dall'ordinario che possono riorganizzare la nostra forma di vita. È stato invitato a presentare i suoi progetti performativi, tra gli altri, dalla Biennale di Venezia - Teatro (2020) e dal Singapore Arts Festival (2012). Il suo lavoro come drammaturgo è stato pubblicato in Italia e all'estero.

Antonio Ianniello is a performance artist, playwright and researcher. He was born in Salerno, Italy, in 1979 and moved to Rome, where he is based. He attended the "Silvio D'Amico" National Academy of Dramatic Art and graduated in philosophy from "La Sapienza" University in Rome, where he completed a PhD on the ecological-enactive approach to artistic practices. His interest is in what he calls monstrous practices, that is, practices completely out of ordinary that can reorganize our form of life. He has been invited to present his performance projects by the Venice Biennale-Theater (2020) and the Singapore Arts Festival (2012), among others. His work as a playwright has been published in Italy and abroad.

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