Aisthesis

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Habits Changing Habits: Aesthetic Technologies between Discipline and Experiment in Theater and Performance Art

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Abstract. The paper gives an account of a peculiar connection between art and habits that started emerging with the historical avant-gardes. Especially in avant-garde theater, artistic practices began developing genuinely aesthetic technologies to transform social habits. By examining three case studies – the biomechanics of Vsevolod Meyerhold, the poor theater of Jerzy Grotowski, and the constructed situations of Tino Sehgal – this paper traces the development of these aesthetic technologies up to contemporary art. Unlike the avant-gardes who sought to eliminate the boundary between art and life or contemporary participatory art, aesthetic technologies maintain the character of artifice. This contribution argues that it is precisely through this artifice that these aesthetic technologies provide the experience of a form of habits different from the one installed by the disciplinary modern regime that Michel Foucault described and its continuation into new forms of self-optimization. By differentiating the functioning of aesthetic technologies from Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics, the paper outlines their aesthetic as well as critical importance within contemporary neoliberal societies.

Keywords. Technologies of the self, acting techniques, embodiment, dishabituation, receptivity.

With the advent of modern art, it has become customary to conceive of art as breaking with habits. By fabricating new objects, inventing new techniques, or creating unprecedented experiences, art suspends everyday practice and its routines. The historical avant-gardes did not fully reject this modernist understanding but partly redirected it. Their intervention is often characterized as an attempt to dissolve the boundaries between art and life, to therefore not only interrupt the everyday, but to create a new social life with artistic means. This definition, however, is inadequate to a broad spectrum of artistic practices running under the avant-garde label – more specifically, those that did not try to fully dissolve the relation between art and life, but rather sought to redefine it. These avant-gardes established a peculiar take on habits by developing what I will call *aesthetic technologies to transform habits*[1].

Drawing on Adorno's «double character» of art (Adorno [1979]: 5), we can describe these aesthetic technologies as simultaneously aesthetic and social phenomena which do not simply disturb social habits, nor try to design new ones; aesthetic technologies are aesthetic habits that work on (or rework) *the form* of social habituation but within the realm of artistic practice itself and for aesthetic purposes. By doing so, however, they provide the experience of the possibility of changing the form of habit, and they thus gesture towards a different mode of embodied practice.

In the following, I will work out what these aesthetic technologies are by analyzing three case studies starting with the avant-garde theater of Vsevolod Meyerhold, then moving on to the poor theater of Jerzy Grotowski in the postwar period, and finally to the contemporary construction of situations by Tino Sehgal. With this sequence, I suggest that aesthetic technologies continue to permeate artistic practices up until today[2]. I have chosen to focus on theater and performative practices as the basis of this characterization because it is here that we find the most striking articulations and elaborations of these technologies, although I believe this framework also has much to offer for other forms of artistic production that work on the spectator's habits in less systematic or durational ways. My choice of the case studies does not rely on art historical assumptions, but follows an interest in an aesthetics that scrutinizes the critical or subversive potential of artistic production. In my reading, the three case studies display different modalities in which aesthetic technologies can work on social habituation. I will describe these as *deconstruction*, *negation*, and *suspension*[3].

In order to understand the emergence and the very use of these aesthetic technologies, I begin by revisiting Michel Foucault's analysis of modern discipline as providing (together with Marx) a crucial insight: that the rise of modern capitalist society and of modern labour as its core practice not only introduced new social habits, but a new *form* of habituation. Against this background, I will discuss my three case studies as different attempts to react to and transform the

form of disciplinary habituation in its various historical forms. In this sense, I hold that Foucault's notion of discipline as a technology – i.e. as a regulated procedure of social habituation not only designed to train specific skills, but also to create a specific mode of having skills, which I call a "mode of embodiment" – continues to be valid in to the present, albeit with due modifications[4]. This is why the analysis of aesthetic technologies is of interest for a contemporary critical aesthetics and is all the more so in a society like the contemporary one, where changing one's habits has become an economic necessity and even an industry in its own right. I will thus close by highlighting the critical role of aesthetic technologies as I understand them within contemporary societies by contrasting them with Richard Shusterman's «somaesthetics» and its «meliorative» take on aesthetic practices.

Disciplined habits

At the beginning of *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault speaks of modern (western) societies as being characterized by a peculiar «"political economy" of bodies» (Foucault [1975]: 25). The bodies characteristic of modern and capitalist societies are «docile» and made so by a specific social technology Foucault famously names «discipline» (Foucault [1975]: 134-135). In characterizing discipline, Foucault does not use the term "habit" very often, although he does in one crucial passage:

> By the late eighteenth century, the soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit; in short, one has "got rid of the peasant" and given him "the air of a soldier". (Foucault [1975]: 135)[5]

The quote makes it unequivocally clear that the bodily economy Foucault describes significantly concerns the level of habits. But even more importantly, it shows that modern subjects are not only characterized by specific habits (e.g. those of the soldier instead of those of the peasant), but also by a specific *form* of habits. Such habits are constructed and mastered through discipline; they become ready at all times, functioning automatically in an almost mechanical form of repetition. This, then, is what speaking of a «political economy of bodies» means: it is not only about asking what norms regulate and govern bodies, but also what internal organization of bodily resources emerges as a result of modern subjectivation.

Foucault initially uses the construction of the soldier to explain the modern form of a «docile body». However, what replaces the peasant in capitalist moder-

nity is not just military discipline, but most importantly the discipline of labour. In the course of the chapter, Foucault implicitly shifts the focus to the body of the worker, and the characterization of discipline changes accordingly. The worker's body is not simply imbued with coercion, like a military machine; it is designed to intensify its capabilities.

In his later works on biopolitics and neoliberalism, Foucault will continue the line of inquiry opened up by *Discipline and Punish* by analyzing softer, more subtle technologies of power which I nevertheless see as continuous with the economy of discipline. In these new modalities, an instrumental use of the body as the site of «the efficient gesture» (Foucault [1975]: 152, 11, 26, 30) remains in place[6], and it is still a *specific sort of mastery* that shapes the use of the body as well as the form and function of habit.[7] The modern body begins as a body without properties which is molded and formed into an efficient site of reliable capacities to be put to work, and it is further enhanced through changing techniques of self-optimization.

Disciplinary modes of embodiment thereby take advantage of what Claire Carlisle describes as the «double law of habit» (Carlisle [2014]: 27-31): the more routine and automatic an embodied practice becomes, the more its productivity can be increased. The habits created by modern labour thus have a very peculiar form: they are those identifiable activities the body can perform as automatically as possible so that the attention can be directed toward their optimization, in terms of qualitative doing and, more importantly for capitalism, of quantitative productivity. Though this may seem obvious for manual work in the factory, the same pattern can be discerned in the so called «immaterial labor» (Lazzarato [1996]) characteristic of late capitalist western societies. Universities, to give but one example, increasingly apply quantitative criteria in their internal organization and evaluation; they encourage an idea of teaching and learning as the passing on and acquiring of reliable skills that can be quantified and compared, that can be divided into "modules", and so on.

Meyerhold's gestures

Unlike Marx, from whom the concept of discipline was derived, Foucault did not see the factory as the only site of discipline. Prisons, hospitals, schools, the military – all these venues contribute to the formation of docile bodies as the specific mode of embodiment in capitalist societies. Although *Discipline and Punish* does not discuss museums or theaters, it is not hard to see these institutions as belated successors to Foucault's asylums: they are comparable sites of disciplinary habituation where individualized, controlled subjectivities and sensitivities are formed according to particular artistic genres as well as a specific (bourgeois) mode of

experience and use of pleasures (see Crary [1999], Fischer-Lichte [2004], Lepecki [2006]), which accordingly reproduce social divisions and domination.

Just as the disciplinary regimes of factories, prisons, and schools have been opposed throughout their history, museums and theaters have also been repeatedly challenged by artistic practices seeking out new exhibition and performance formats. In the context of the historical avant-gardes and their claim to transform art and society or, as I would put it, to transform the relationship between art and society, theater has played a paradigmatic role. As Erica Fischer-Lichte has shown in detail, a crucial impulse of avant-garde theater was to overcome the (bourgeois) domination of the text in favor of the material performance of the bodies on stage as well as the «co-presence» of actors and spectators in the theater space, valued as both aesthetically and politically relevant (Fischer-Lichte [2004]: 38).

In the context of this transformation, new types of acting techniques emerged: they were no longer mere exercises to master the text particularly well and to ensure the most exact possible repeatability of the performance. The new acting techniques did not put the actors' bodies at the service of the text, but searched for ways to maintain the bodies' affectability and expressivity *despite the repetition* of their performance. It is therefore not surprising that one of the first crucial and impactful contributions to this new sort of techniques came from revolutionary Russia and was formed within the general attempt to overcome the economic foundation of domination.

The theatrical practice of Vsevolod Emilyevich Meyerhold (1874-1940), which had already started in tsarist Russia, flourished in this revolutionary context. Between 1921 and 1926, he served as one of the highest theater officials in the new Soviet state, contributing to a «revolutionary theater» (Meyerhold [1920]: 168). His theatrical practice was especially revolutionary in its development of a new acting technique he called «biomechanics» (see Brown [1998]). It was a stylized, non-naturalistic, and physically demanding form of theatrical performance, for which Lyubov Popova created acrobatic stage constructions.

Precisely because of its formalism, Meyerhold's practice came into conflict with the realism that became the standard of socialist aesthetics in the 1930s, which demanded that art be as "true to reality" as possible. In 1938 Meyerhold's theater was closed, and in 1940 he fell victim to the Stalinist purges.

Meyerhold's «biomechanics», however, was not just a new acting technique, and it can be better characterized as an aesthetic technology to transform social habituation. This becomes especially clear when compared to the practice of Meyerhold's teacher Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski, who had also begun developing new acting methods. Stanislavski's method, which later caused a furor in Hollywood, remained within the framework of naturalistic theater and worked with the actors' pre-existing psychological states. By contrast, Meyerhold pushed

for a more fundamental revolution of acting as a practice: «The very craft of the actor must be completely reorganized» (Meyerhold [1922]: 197).

"To reorganize the craft of the actor" meant to train the actor in a form very different from what had been done thus far, in order to provide a very different expressivity and presence on stage. Meyerhold was concerned, in Barbara Gronau's words, with a «theater of energy» (Gronau [2007])[8] derived from materialistic premises. Unlike the acting method of his teacher, Meyerhold did not work with psychological dispositions, but by training the bodies and movements in a new way. Interestingly enough, Meyerhold did so by incorporating a social technique from the "west" into his method, namely Frederick Winslow Taylor's method of scientific management, i.e. an optimized form of disciplinary analysis and simplification of movement sequences, with which Meyerhold sought to achieve «maximum productivity» (Meyerhold [1922]: 198) in acting as well.

During Russia's early revolutionary industrialization, the procedures of American industrial society were a model advanced by Aleksei Kapitonovich Gastev and Nikolai Aleksandrovich Bernstein. Meyerhold attributed to them not only the potential for economic progress, but also for the transformation of work into a «joyful, vital necessity» (Meyerhold [1922]: 197). Attaining a «dance-like quality» (Meyerhold [1922]: 198), work should not be separated and opposed to leisure anymore. In a society where work is joyful and «borders on art», art in turn would not only serve for relaxation, but become «something organically vital to the labour pattern of the worker» (Meyerhold [1922]: 198, 197). Theater performances should therefore be part of the working day and ideally take place in the factory, performed utilizing time «as economically as possible» (Meyerhold [1922]: 198). The Taylorized theater, according to Meyerhold, «will make it possible to play as much in one hour as we can now offer in four» (Meyerhold [1922]: 198).

Analogous to social discipline, Meyerhold's theatrical biomechanics was intended to help the actor achieve technical mastery: «The actor», the same text states, «must train his material (the body), so that it is capable of executing instantaneously those tasks which are dictated externally (by the actor, the director)» and do so «as economically as possible» (Meyerhold 1922: 198). But this foreshadowing of Foucault's description of discipline as the technology of the efficient gesture in fact only ended up superficially resembling the Taylorist method (see also Braun [1969]: 183).

Meyerhold's theatrical use of Taylorist procedures in combination with Ivan Petrovitsch Pavlov's and Vladimir Mikhailovich Bekhterev's scientific studies of nerve reflexes (studies in physiological habituation, as it were) was not oriented to the greatest possible efficiency, but to train «reflex excitability» (Meyerhold [1922]: 199), i.e. the capacity to materially embody new

roles (therefore changing habits) and to give them «plastic forms» (Meyerhold [1922]: 199). Meyerhold's conception of the actor's training and performance is crucial here. Biomechanics not only undertakes a technical analysis of movement like its scientific counterparts, but a theatrical *deconstruction* of everyday gestures. The segmented movements are brought into a new dynamic sequence in order to make them affective (and not effective) through exaggeration and distortion.

Meyerhold's practice is aptly characterized as an aesthetic and not as a social technology because it combined and mixed Taylorism with genuinely artistic influences like the popular and improvisational Italian Commedia dell'Arte as well as stylized body techniques like Japanese Kabuki – types of popular and "non-western" influences characteristic of so many other theatrical avant-gardes. Through the influence of Kabuki and Commedia dell'Arte, Meyerhold's theater draws on the register of the grotesque and transforms Taylorist discipline into something else: not the efficient representation of a text, but the «manifestation of a force» (Meyerhold [1922]: 199) through plastic gestures, which are never frozen, but integrated in a rhythmic, dynamic event. Meyerhold's actors are a «perpetuum mobile» (Meyerhold [1926]: 223): «In contrast to the pose […] [they] work on the potential transition into a new movement» (Gronau [2007]: 15; see also Pitches [2003]).

The augmented rhythms of modern industrial life resonate throughout Meyerhold's merger of science and art into a new and peculiar performative mode, but these rhythms are reassembled into gestures that are not just an exact reproduction or continuation. One could maybe speak here of a "counter-discipline" that uses the procedures of labour as well as theater discipline to investigate the aesthetic possibility of letting excitement and affectability emerge in the midst of discipline, to exceed habituated behavior through a habituated practice, in which habits "function" in a different way.

Meyerhold's practice is grotesque. It is characterized by exaggerated and deformed habituated gestures, and by a rhythmic processuality very different from the regulated one of the assembly line. The actor's movements were trained to display an excess, to reach «points of excitation» (Meyerhold [1922]: 199), that should draw the spectator into their energy. Avant-garde theater became a body laboratory in which new modes of embodiment were tested using the "political economy of bodies", while also opposing it. It did so with explicit aesthetic means and purposes, and this is precisely what brought him into conflict with socialist realism.

From a distance, the difference between Meyerhold's method and social discipline may seem small when considering his unbroken faith in progress and the rigorous acrobatic discipline his theater still required. But not only did it cost Meyerhold his life, his biomechanics also made a difference by opening the door

for (materialist) body work that more explicitly sought out subversive or excessive potentials in and through the habituated body.

Grotowski's poverty

Jerzy Grotowski saw himself in the tradition of Meyerhold, since he studied his practice. His theater also puts a premium on methodology and technique, but, more radically than Meyerhold, Grotowski approaches the aesthetic technologies of theater from the perspective of transforming social habits. He thus no longer applied Taylorist procedures or similar social practices, but instead worked "against" socially habituated practices in order to transform them.

Having grown up during the Second World War, Grotowski then went on to study in Poland and Moscow. Due to the situation in the People's Republic of Poland at that time, his theater was no longer involved in the utopian construction of a new society. Theater became a «place of provocation» of a peculiar kind, since for Grotowski it «is capable of challenging itself and its audience by violating accepted stereotypes of seeing, feeling, and judgment – more jarring because it is imaged in the human organism's breath, body, and inner impulses.» (Grotowski [1965]: 21-22) In Poland he repeatedly came into conflict with the ruling cultural authorities, until international success granted him some protection. In his final phase of activity, however, Grotowski left the theater and founded a «Workcenter» in Pontedera, Italy, where he engaged in self-explorative group-practices.

This development is hardly surprising given Grotowski's acting method. His bodily techniques introduce certain practices as much as they lead out of others: they aim at the «eradication of blocks» that socialization has placed between impulses and reactions, as well as «freedom from the time-lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction» (Grotowski [1968a]: 16-17). For Grotowski, social habits were first and foremost masks, fossilized forms of expression that must be made permeable again through theater – in the actor as well as in the spectator. His practice therefore embodies what one of his most renowned scholars, Eugenio Barba, would call «Theatre Anthropology» (Barba [1993]), i.e. the idea that theatrical or performative practices contribute to the very constitution of the human.

Although influenced by Russian avant-garde theater as well as Japanese and Indian theatrical practices like Noh and Kathakali, Grotowski did not see his method as a combination of these various procedures, at least not in the sense of a «box of tricks» to achieve some end (Grotowski [1968c]: 262). For him, and this is crucial, acting was no longer a «collection of skills» (Grotowski [1968a]: 17) or an ability that one acquires and masters (or better: abilities and skills were not the crucial element of acting).

His Theater Laboratory developed specific trainings for every new performance, consisting of "merely" physical exercises and exercises in embodiment. The latter were not only confined to practices with one's own role, but consisted in the imaginary (today we would say transhuman) embodiments of plants, animals, and "impossible" activities like flying. Here, an important reversal takes place: the embodiment exercises are not a prerequisite, i.e. mere training for a better mastery of the role, which in a certain sense was still the case for Meyerhold. «The important thing is to use the role as a trampoline, an instrument with which to study what is hidden behind our everyday mask». (Grotowski [1968b]: 37)

Grotowski thus relied on special procedures of embodiment, «augmented embodiments», one could say in the words of German performance artist Johannes Paul Raether (Raether [2018]: 193), not with props, but with roles. On this point, his practice is, therefore, eminently theatrical. While for Meyerhold the "artfulness" of theater consists in a deconstruction of gestures and a play with the grotesque, for Grotowski it first has to pass through a negative process. In contrast to Asian theater, which works with an «accumulation of signs» and artificial repetitions of forms, Grotowski relies on «subtraction» (Grotowski [1968a]: 18). He described his practice accordingly as a «via negativa» (Grotowski [1968a]: 17), operating through the dismantling of habituated social practices.

Grotowski's theater, however, does not aim at a supposed authenticity or immediacy. In this, it sharply differs from Antonin Artaud's impulsiveness. Grotowski admires Artaud only as a «visionary» not as a theater director (Grotowski [1968a]: 24): «Creativity, especially where acting is concerned, is boundless sincerity, yet disciplined» (Grotowski [1968c]: 261). Through the exercises of the via negativa that Grotowski also understood as a «spiritual technique» requiring «concentration, confidence, exposure, and almost disappearance into the acting craft» (Grotowski [1968a]: 17), the actor gradually goes beyond habituated behavior. They gain awareness and lay bare forces and impulses that exceed ossified habits, but in order to engage with them in a play of signs. Besides the poetic embodiments of different living beings similar to Butoh practices, Grotowski also worked with the construction of contradictions: between gesture and voice, voice and word, will and action. This play with signs is the reason why Grotowski's practice is not a mere expression of supposedly pre-social forces or impulses (like Artaud's), but a creative one. The dismantling of ossified social habits goes together with the engagement in a new form of habituated embodied practice: «[t]here is no contradiction between inner technique and artifice (articulation of a role by signs)» (Grotowski [1968a]: 17). Precisely this connection between a negative and an active side is what helps Grotowski's acting avoid returning to a form of mastery similar to the social habituation Foucault described as dis-

cipline. In contrast to Meyerhold's technology, acting here becomes a creative process of a peculiar kind. It is no longer an act of sovereign will, but a slightly paradoxical twofold act: a «passive readiness to realize an active role, a state in which one does not "want to do that" but rather "resigns from not doing it"» (Grotowski [1968a]: 17).

It is in dismantling habituated mastery through doing that acting becomes a creative «act of transgression» (Grotowski [1968a]: 19). This is also the reason why Grotowski's theater advocates «poverty». Besides the rejection of mastery and the subtractive via negativa, Grotowski eliminates even more radically than Meyerhold almost all staging elements apart from the actor's body and the use of space: no makeup, no light, no music, no set.

This transgression, however, primarily involves the actor, who is personally trained by Grotowski, and it is perhaps also the reason why in his last phase of activity he left the theater entirely. Grotowski's practice became one of those movements that subsequently began to engage in self-experience groups towards the end of the 1960s. Like many of these, the Workcenter in Pontedera was centered on Grotowski's charismatic personality and his personal knowledge[9]. It is not just an irony of history that these practices became the forerunners of new social technologies, in which social discipline softened into forms of self-care and creative flexibility within the neoliberal «social factory» of postwar political economy, as Italian operaism dubbed it. An art that – quite literally – locates itself in the fibers of the social inevitably runs the risk of blurring the boundary with social practice. Grotowski himself became actively and consciously interested in doing so. This shift, however, comes at high cost, in that it increases the risk of turning teaching into domination and providing technologies that can be easily coopted by social engineering.

That this does not hold for Grotowski's theatrical phase, shows the maybe slight, but crucial difference between aesthetic technologies and social ones. Grotowski's theater necessarily remains at a certain distance from social practices, and not only because of its negativity, but also because of its artificiality, its visionary work with roles and embodiment. The conscious and guided bodily and "spiritual" training of the actor has aesthetic qualities that the new social technologies lack. Grotowski inserts a moment of impossibility into the mastering of roles or practices. It combines habituation and creativity as current neoliberal ideology does, but it does not engage in an easy and necessarily successful creativity; failure and negativity can remain constitutive elements of Grotowski's anti-sovereign aesthetic technology precisely because they do not have to function within a social context. It is through this that they affect and transform social life, *via aesthetica*.

Sehgal's situations

Meyerhold and Grotowski both worked with discipline in order to create a new form of habituated (performative) practice. With critical awareness of capitalist social technologies, they broke down the bluntness of this political economy of the body in order to open up the actor's body to a different excitability or receptivity. Tino Sehgal works with other means. His pieces generally take place in visual art venues for the entire duration of their opening hours. Their performative frame of reference is not theater, but (postmodern) dance. Much like theater, dance started rejecting the discipline of ballet in the course of the 20th century. Modern and postmodern dancer-choreographers like Martha Graham or later Yvonne Rainer began transforming the practice of choreography and of the dancing bodies by refusing the fixed, but also exhausting grammar of classical dance. From the 1960s on, visual art, the newly emerging performance art (and its variations), and video art also joined this endeavor. These artistic practices were less characterized by explicit techniques than theater or dance, yet they also began experimenting with different uses of the body. Tino Sehgal, who rejects the terms performance and performer for his works, preferring to speak of «constructed situations» and «interpreters», engages professional dancers, some of whom he repeatedly works with, but he also significantly works with groups of amateurs often deliberately chosen from specific professional groups (curators, academics, etc.). The structure of the pieces is repetitive and at the same time modular. It consists of choreographic or discursive sequences that the interpreters can use and recombine so that the pieces never exactly repeat. Many of them involve or address the audience, which further contributes to the singularity of the created situations. Because of this combination of repetitive and unexpected moments, the pieces have the structure of a practice that is constitutively open; the modules of the pieces can be used, but always with unforseeable results.

Since Sehgal's pieces have similar structures, but not a common technique, I will focus in the following on a specific early work, *This Situation* (2007), since the discursive part of the piece explicitly deals with technologies of the self and the connection between art and life[10].

The piece works with a specific group of amateurs, preferably with an academic or at least theoretical-discursive background, who learn relatively simple choreographic and discursive sequences along with "rules" they briefly rehearse. Without going too much into the piece's inner "mechanisms", its scaffolding consists of certain poses and quotes that touch on themes of ecology, economy, and significantly also technologies of the self and the role of art. Much like with Meyerhold's biomechanics, the interpreters are constantly in motion while conversing on these topics, with the important difference that they move in slow motion and occasionally freeze in certain poses. As in Grotowski's exercises, the

normal rhythm of speech is contrasted by extremely slowed down gestures – a choreography everyone can do, but is nevertheless quite demanding.

In this way, the gestures performed while talking stop being casual automatisms and together with the topics of the conversation become increasingly part of the interpreter's and the spectator's awareness. This peculiar choreography of attention is one of the reasons why *This Situation* can be described as an aesthetic technology. Although the conversations that take place within the piece are not scripted or staged, but rather "spontaneous" reactions to the quotes, they never appear as simply real. The visitor remains suspended in uncertainty as to what exactly is scripted and what not, as well as what sort of situation they have found themselves in.

The fact that the interpreters are academics makes them particularly suited for the piece's intensive discursive work. However, talking in a museum and in front of museum visitors who are not experts effects a double decontextualization of their expertise. Displaying one's skills in a museum brings them into a peculiar state of suspension, too: they can be used, but in a slightly different, more experimental way, without ever being sure what the effects will be. The piece, in turn – and this is a further reason why it is best described as an aesthetic technology – undermines the «double law of habit» of disciplinary capacities since the habituation to it never fully reaches the stage of automatism; the piece can never be mastered. It is almost the opposite: the fact that the piece uses everyday conversational and professional skills in an art institution produces a distance, even a de-habituation from habituated embodiment and practice. By doing almost the same thing as in "real" life, but with the slight contextual difference of doing it in a museum and in front of an audience that anticipates art, the piece produces situations that exceed the interpreters' skills and the visitors' expectations. It ultimately brings the museum into a mode of suspension as well, not only because it has to host and deal with very different artistic "material", but because this very material engages in a transformative way with the tradition of visual art it acknowledges and at the same time uses that tradition in an unprecedented way.

Like the conceptual artists before him, Sehgal attempted to undermine the commodity character of art by creating immaterial works to the point of even prohibiting their technical reproduction. All the same, his «constructed situations» were still welcomed with open arms by parts of the visual art system – biennials, museums, Kunstvereine, foundations – that do not directly participate in the art market but are nonetheless key players in the economy of valorization. This is hardly surprising at a time when circulation and attention have gained an economic importance which may even surpass that of producing lasting objects. Likewise, the process of deskilling the interpreters as well as the spectators resonates with flexible societies, where one is constantly (more or less gently) being

forced to adapt to new environments. And much like neoliberal social norms, the rules of Sehgal's situations form a rather loose arrangement that can be varied and interpreted in different ways.

This ambivalent proximity, however, is precisely what characterizes Sehgal's work as an aesthetic technology. Unlike Meyerhold and Grotowski, Sehgal uses social practices, knowledges, and skills without transforming them via developed techniques. He only uses them in a slightly different way, in a slightly different context. Here, it is the institution of art, with its explicit and implicit rules, that is made to work as a de-habituation device, affecting the habituated skills of the interpreters whose actions, in turn, affect the expectations of the visitors and the functioning of the museum.

The casual modular structure of *This Situation* resembles flexible neoliberal norms, but differs from them in an interesting way. The situations created among interpreters and viewers are aesthetic in the sense that they are mediated by a specific, though very simple form that detaches conversations and movements from their normal functioning and their predictable effects. This *suspends* them: the piece almost exclusively uses tools and skills from everyday life, but by giving very simple rules and bringing them into a museum, it breaks them open from within. The "conversation" the piece initiates is a peculiar one, though not a real one; it is *This Situation*, an art piece. Both during and after participating in the piece, it provides a different sort of awareness for the topics and the mode of talking about them, for unprecedented connections between them, for the materiality of the discussion, the role of the body and the bodies in it, and so on. It shifts value and function. Seemingly banal topics become profound; allegedly serious ones become too abstract. The de-habituation the piece provides is therefore combined with the experience of a new "form" of habituation – one where skills or movements are not just automatic, not just predictably effective and plastic, not solidified, but rather are responsive to different situations in an intense way.

Tino Sehgal's piece thus makes a difference on several levels: it does not confront us with a counter-discipline, but with a counter-practice that puts one's habituated skills and knowledges on the line, and creates a new awareness for modes and topics of conversation and thought. This holds for the interpreter, but, more so than with Meyerhold and Grotowski, also for the viewer, at least for those who decide to spend some time with the piece and maybe even experience it more than once.

Although Sehgal's pieces do not escape their social and capitalist context, at least to the extent they initially sought to, they keep it suspended, providing a space of experimentation and also of different encounters, which are anything but simple or uniformly successful. This is why – and this is maybe a last difference between social practices and aesthetic technologies – there are also mo-

ments where the work "fails": the conversation does not unfold, is boring, the atmosphere in the room is unpleasant, one gets tired, etc. Imperfection and awkwardness are very much staples of reality show formats nowadays; in Sehgal's situations, however, they do not echo the format by making the work more funny or supposedly more "real". When the conversation "fails", it just fails, and people might leave or not. These moments are not recouped as entertainment; they are not functional to the piece. Although they are definitely part of it, these are the moments where the piece cracks and displays its difference from social reality by failing to keep up its artifice.

Art in life

From the revolutionary impetus to provide new modes of acting and working, via the post-war attempt to provoke and transgress ossified habits, to situations that use almost exclusively everyday skills and knowledges but in an unusual context – the three case studies differ from each other significantly. But following Foucault's discussion of discipline as a technology, I have adopted this term in order to show how these performative practices operate in a similar mode despite their differences, i.e. as regulated procedures of habituation not only oriented toward training new skills, but also creating a new mode of having skills, a different mode of embodiment. They have different effects as aesthetic technologies and in terms of their choice of techniques, yet they all function as practices of de-habituation which at the same time display the possibility of a different form of habituation, one not oriented towards a reliable and docile productivity, but imbued with excess and inoperativity.

These aesthetic technologies, as it were, show a different "form" of habituation with respect to the disciplinary mode of embodiment that is paradigmatic of workerist and capitalist societies. Precisely because of this, they stand in contrast not only to social discipline but also to contemporary technologies of the self which suggest that we are infinitely malleable and can transform ourselves as we want, while they in fact transform us into just another determinate shape of ourselves that more often than not fulfills (new) social norms.

This last difference can be highlighted by a very brief comparison with Richard Shusterman's «somaesthetics». Drawing on Foucault's technologies of the self and pragmatism, but also referring to practices like Yoga, Zen Meditation, T'ai chi, or western bodywork like the Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais[11], Shusterman defines somaesthetics as «the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning» (Shusterman [2000]: 532). Although Shusterman shares Foucault's awareness of the body as «a

malleable site for inscribing social power» (Shusterman [1999]: 303), the "critical" dimension of the use of techniques he advises remains in the background compared to the improving character he is advising.

Somaesthetics advertises alternative practices of self-care, but without reflecting on the necessity of changing the modality of habituation, its form, and its goals. In fact, Shusterman describes somaesthetics as the aim to «improve the acuity, health, and control of our senses by cultivating heightened attention and mastery of their somatic functioning while also freeing us from bodily habits and defects that impair sensory performance» (Shusterman [1999]: 302). Engaging in these practices implies a change of habits, but Shusterman leaves it open in which sense the «meliorative» purpose of somaesthetics differs from capitalist self-enhancement.

The aesthetic technologies I have discussed in this paper differ from disciplinary enhancement, but also from the somaesthetic «melioration» of habits, in that they: 1.) undertake a critical or at least transformative intervention into disciplinary modalities, and therefore actively differentiate themselves from the latter; 2.) are aesthetic in the sense of not pursuing a determinate social or individual goal (such as melioration), but also not a predefined artistic goal (as in the case of older acting techniques). Though stemming from avant-garde practices, they never fully dismantle the difference between art (artifice) and life. By doing so, they present a different connection between art and habit than the one often ascribed to modernism: habits appear not as the opponent, but as the very site and means of aesthetic transformation.

Deconstruction, negation, and suspension, the three different modalities I outlined here, provide a new form of habituation by using social practices and operating on social habits. This, I think, is how aesthetic technologies bring *art into life*: they do not directly try to change the social world, as the reception of the avant-garde commonly claims; rather, they use social patterns as a material to be formed differently for aesthetic purposes. In this, they remain artifice and it is as artifice that they provide the experience of habits as something one does not master or instrumentally use to fulfill social tasks. They display habituation as something unfinished, incorporating an «ability of inability» (Menke [2008]: 86), which allows unexpected transformation and expression. The artifice is necessary not only to provide distance from social habits, but moreover to display this distance, to make it visible and experienceable for others. This is why aesthetic technologies show the excess and inoperativity of habits, but within a sphere that is (slightly) detached from social production or prediction.

This difference is especially salient at a time when technologies of the self and, more precisely, the imperative to change our habits have become ubiquitous. Even the language-learning app Duolingo advertises its services with «habit-

building research»[12], and there is a growing social awareness of the importance of habits and their functioning. Habits are seen as the target, but also – and this is new – as the medium of self-transformation. In many cases, the increased knowledge about how to change habits and how habits underlie change proves to be little different from the disciplinary regime Foucault describes, but is rather a continuation via slightly different means. No longer bound to disciplinary asylums and updated with a vocabulary of *self*-transformation (and *self*-care), the aim of these practices nevertheless continues to be that of increased productivity and the instrumental use of the body for social approbation.

Precisely by operating on social conditioning by consciously "undoing" it, but also by not being oriented towards a direct self-enhancement, aesthetic technologies display a different use of the body than the disciplinary one. The divergence from social practices is, however, fragile. Art can no longer pretend to stand outside of society, if indeed it ever could. The avant-garde concern with transforming the relation between art and life has been absorbed by an intensely capitalized and spectacular art scene[13]. As a result, those formats that bring art too close to life by activating the spectator through participatory formats often end up affirming this capitalized art spectacle instead of rejecting it[14].

My three cases studies, in fact, display very different modalities and complexities of artifice, from specifically developed acting techniques that require rather demanding training to simple rules that only need a few rehearsals and mostly use social "material". Although aesthetic technologies seem to come closer to the spectator and become more accessible, the artifice never fully vanishes. Sehgal's works need established artistic institutions – which limits their scope of action to museums or art venues and their visitors, a rather specific segment of society. And although their choreographies are simple and in a certain sense accessible, they provide rather unfamiliar situations within supposedly familiar contexts – something not every spectator is eager to be exposed to. The slightly uncanny feeling created by the suspension of established expectations makes *This Situation* rather different from the convivial situations oriented towards encounters between visitors and their well-being of the kind described by Nicholas Bourriaud in his relational aesthetics (see Bourriaud [1998]). Whereas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics understands participatory formats as the attempt to create micro-communities and shape new social forms of neighborhood, Sehgal works with mediated aesthetic technologies. His "constructed situations" are not just new possible social practices, they are devices to experience practice and embodiment functioning in ways different than what we are used to, while using "material" we are familiar with. Instead of directly proposing a practice, the mediation through artifice reworks established habits via their suspension (or deconstruction, or negation as in the other two cases) in a way that cannot be

directly put to practice or used for social purposes. Through this, it creates space for an experience of the possibility of a practice working otherwise, not mastered, not instrumental. Aesthetic technologies exceed the realm of discipline and of self-enhancement, but by creating aesthetic not social practices. They do not propose new ways of living but give a glimpse of what and how things could be different. As art in life, aesthetic technologies open up one's sense of different modes of embodiment and thus of seeking and envisioning new ways of living as practices working otherwise.

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Notes

1 Following Foucault, I use "technology" as a general term to characterize the regulated uses of bodies oriented toward specific modes of embodiment, whereas I reserve "technique" for the specific practices and instruments used by such technologies.

2 Not only do aesthetic technologies continue to characterize contemporary art, they can also be retrospectively identified in modernist and even pre-modernist art, if we look at them not only as the production of singular extraordinary objects, but as practices in which artists as well as spectators repeatedly engage.
Bertram (2014) has developed a strong argument in favor of a praxeological understanding of art in contrast to an object-oriented understanding. The idea of an "aesthetic education" through art articulated by Friedrich Schiller and Herbert Marcuse also advocates such a praxeological approach, but with a rather different understanding.

3 These three modalities are hardly an exhaustive list of the ways artistic practices can intervene into social ones and transform or subvert their form. Nonetheless, they show an interesting variety of modes in which this happens.

4 This is also why Foucault famously engaged with «technologies of the self» in ancient Greece as well as in early Christianity in order to detect modes of relating to and transforming the self different from the ones western modernity gave rise to, which also continue to inform neoliberal societies (Foucault [1981-1982]).

5 Another, no less crucial passage is: «The apparatus of corrective penalty acts in a quite different way. The point of application of the penalty is not the representation, but the body, time, everyday gestures and activities; the soul, too, but in so far as it is the seat of habits» (Foucault [1975]: 128).

6 In *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault describes the docile body as characterized by «an increased aptitude and an increased domination», but he also mentions a gradual transformation from a mechanistic to a more «organic» (Foucault [1975]: 138, 156) use of the dis-

ciplines, engaging more intimately with the forces of the body. This is the point of direct contact between *Discipline and Punish* and his later work on biopolitics and neoliberalism (see Foucault [1978-1979]).

7 This is something Hegel already recognized clearly in his analysis of bourgeois society in the *Philosophy of Right* (1820) and in his account of habits in the *Encyclopedia* (1830).

8 On the connection between (avant-garde) theater and energy, see also Gronau [2011].

9 After Grotowski's death, the Workcenter continued operating under the leadership of Thomas Richards, who keeped on developing Grotowski's practice, but it eventually closed in 2022 due to the aftermath of the Covid-pandemic.

10 Sehgal's works *This Progress* (2006) and *This Variation* (2012) could also be discussed as aesthetic technologies of de-habituation, but lack this explicit thematization of self-transformation and the aesthetics of existence. Furthermore, I also had the chance to experience this piece "from inside" as an interpreter during its display at Martin-Gropius Bau in Summer 2015 and at Stedelijk Museum in Fall 2015, from which I derive some of the descriptions of the effects of its practice. On *This Situation* and the practice of Tino Sehgal, see also von Hantelmann [2010]; Umathum [2011].

11 Criticizing Shusterman does not eo ipso mean criticizing these practices in themselves, but rather a specific use of them.

12 https://blog.duolingo.com/how-duolingo-streak-builds-habit/

13 Here I am using Guy Debord's notion of «spectacle», but to describe tendencies of the art scene and not society at large as Debord did (see Debord [1967]).

14 For a differentiated critique of participatory formats, see Bishop (2004); Rancière (2008).