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Zlatko Paković's *Vox Dei – Civil Disobedience* as an Embodied Text: The Impact of Different Types of Spaciality on Semioticity of a Performance

Abstract: This paper deals with the corporeality of a performance and its place in the process of the emergence of meaning, following a case study of a Serbian theatrical piece *Vox Dei – Civil Disobedience*. Performance is constituted by bodies brought together by a certain purpose and temporal and spatial coordinates, and it is more and more often now decoded by the feedback loop performers and participants form in specific kinds of spatiality. Artistic corporeality defies objectivization, therefore the relational aesthetics is needed instead of an idealistic one to investigate the materiality of these performances. Using this theoretical framework, the analysis of the two different performances of the same dramatic text from the recent Serbian political theater production will tend to examine the nature of political potential of bodily co-presence in artistically and socially different environments and its implications for the semioticity of the given embodied text.

Keywords: corporeality; bodily co-presence; performance; political theater; spatiality; *Vox Dei – Civil Disobedience*. Zlatko Paković.

Introduction

When it comes to performance studies, in recent decades much has been done in order to shift the focus from the semiotic approach of the most part of theater historiography and critiques to the more performative one that refers not only to artwork – or, in this case more appropriately, art event – but also every public occasion where two or more bodies share the same space in a certain time and with a certain common purpose. The term 'performance' is, however, more complex than one would suggest and, therefore, the analysis of any concrete performance demands previous clarification of the term and its constitutional parts. In this paper we will use a theoretical framework of relational aesthetics given by a scholar Erika Fisher Lichte to deal with two different performances of the play *Vox Dei – Civil Disobedience* directed by Serbian theater author Zlatko Paković – one performed in a public space of a street square and other in the closed area of a municipal City Hall in Belgrade. Even though the

staging of the play was the same, we will examine the repercussions of different types of spatiality on the eventfulness of these performances.

Performance as an event

An artistic performance such as theater play is aesthetically achieved through its own eventfulness and ephemerity and leaves no artifact which can be reproduced, interpreted or archived in any other way but using historiographic methods. The non-existance of an artistic artifact is one of the reasons dramatic arts were unfairly neglected in the praxis of traditional aesthetics. Relational or transformative aesthetics tend to surmount these lapses, facing inevitably the problem of materiality. Materiality is one of the four main characteristics of performance, along with mediality, semioticity and aestheticity. As we will later see, it is achieved through spatiality, corporeality and tonality.

Mediality also includes corporeality, but as a specific way of transmission through bodily co-presence which is, again, linked with semioticity. Bodily co-presence testifies that the assumption of the predetermined meaning of a performance cannot be sustained. Phenomenality *is* meaning. From the perspective of a viewer, there are always two orders present: the perceptual order of presence and perceptual order of representation. Their oscillations, beyond their control, bring them to a liminal state. The perceptual order of representation – the semiotic part of the reception – puts an emphasis on the creation of meaning with signs – proxemic (actors moving in the space), gestural (postulation and gestures), mimic (facial expressions), para-linguistic and linguistic signs.¹ While the linguistic signs are mostly abstract, theatrical ones are very concrete. But, autoreferentiality of theater objects neither transmits nor bans their already existing meaning – as soon as a viewer stops focusing their attention to the phenomenality of perceived, they start to see it as a referent. There is always a lingering possibility of the interference of reality into fiction.

Semiotic and phenomenal oscillations within a subject's perception are of a specific political quality. The role of a subject in the creation of meaning emerges as an important question of Marxism, feminism and deconstruction. Louis Althusser completely erased a subject replacing it with the theory of an ideological determination, according to which subjects exist only as ideological formations. The position of coherence that the subject interprets as themselves he considers adopted out of the ideological mirror.² On the other hand, the epistemology of art is indeed closely dependent on the concrete material conditions of the art world in Danto's sense.³ Even though Althusser's position does seem too exaggerated, it is important to note that

¹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theater and Performance Studies* (London, New York: Routledge, 2014), 56.

² Luj Altiser, *Ideologija i družavni ideološki aparati* (Beograd: Karpos, 2009), 77.

³ Miodrag Šuvaković, Epistemologija umetnosti. Kritični dizajn za procedure i platform savremenog umetničkog obrazovanja (Belgrade: Orion Art), 5.

regarding a subject who constitutes the essence of performance – be it a performer or a viewer – as politically determined is, in fact, inevitable.

Bodily co-presence and community

Bodily co-presence does not suggest only actors being present on stage, but also the viewers who together with them build an autopoietic feedback loop. 4 This loop reaffirms the co-presence as a specific mediality of a performance, as it testifies the transmission of visible and invisible reactions of everyone involved. It identifies the transformance as the fundamental category of relational aesthetics.⁵ This has inherently followed the second performative turn of the 1960s.⁶ Contingency became the central aspect of performance, essentially differentiating it from the staging. While staging includes strategies used to determine time, duration, sounds and the spacial appearance of people and objects, a performance stands for the totality of the exchange during an event staged. That exchange constitutes a performance in the same way the performance constitutes performers and the audience. Given that everything before and after the performance is fundamentally different from it, the performance cannot be controlled by an individual, even though individuals set its basic parameters. As subjects, participants are neither completely autonomous nor completely determined, but they function as co-authors affecting the performance in different ways. The self-creating act is necessarily ephemeral, so bodily co-presence determines the materiality of performance regarding transience – its duration stops the moment bodies physically part. As we have already mentioned, the other elements of materiality, spatiality and tonality are also directly connected with bodily co-presence.⁷

Co-present bodies in performance can build a community. As Janelle Reinelt states, in the case of artistic performance in an institutional framework,

[...] theatre is a democratic institution with its basic structure of shaping scenes and words, that stands in at least analog or hypothetical relation with the human experience, in front of the viewers that estimate and judge it aesthetically... I will paraphrase Althusser, the *mise en scene* addresses the audience with 'Hey, you there!' in order to create a certain kind of community, and if the audience provides a positive answer, between it and performers an imaginative space of sensations and reflections is to be made.⁸

⁴ Fischer-Lichte, The Routledge Introduction to Theater and Performance Studies, 20.

⁵ Fischer-Lichte, The Transformative Power of Performance, 23.

⁶ Vlatko Ilić, Irena Ristić, "Dialogue on Performative Turns: From a Theater Autonomy to the Repeal," in *Theatre Within a Context... And not Just Theater*, ed. Vlatko Ilić, Irena Ristić (Belgrade: Hop.La! and Faculty of Dramatic Arts, 2016), 15.

⁷ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theater and Performance Studies*, 23.

⁸ Janelle Reinelt, *Politics and Performing Arts* (Belgrade: University of Arts, 2012), 83.

She notices that 'we' exist only in continuation of its demonstrations and cannot be represented, and that collectiveness of 'us' that appears in an event does not necessarily, nor it usually does, exist outside of the event. The act of performing and the act of its reception are seen as the reality of 'here and now', but the question remains whether the process of constant change of the autopoietic feedback loop is primarily social or aesthetic. Certain artists, such as Schechner or the Vienna Actionists, did not consider bodily co-presence enough for automatic creation of a community in an artistic event. They proclaimed performing of a ritual as a necessary condition for that, formally avoiding theater institutions but encouraging role inversion. Still, as the autopoietic feedback loop does not function only through visual and auditory elements, but also through an exchange of non-directed energy, Fischer-Lichte considers the creation of a community to be one of the main potentials of bodily co-presence in terms of transformative aesthetics.

Corporeality and embodiment

Corporeality is the core of performing actions. It is characterized by duality, meaning that people, besides having bodies which they can use as an object, are bodies, embodied subjects. The concept of the discrepancy of soma/sema relation is not new nor unquestionably defined and for centuries now has been oscillating between schemes of binary oppositions and a complementary union of elements in disciplines such as philosophy, theology, theater studies and, in more recent time, performance studies. It is fair to say that today the most widely accepted common ground is the one that sees the body as a result of a complex and reciprocal relation between organic and societal, as Richard Schechner puts it, individual bodies participate in natural but also in symbolic order. 10 In the 20th century, besides somatic and discursive, Judith Butler added a performative layer to the body, introducing the concept of never entirely free, but also never entirely fixed identity.¹¹ Duality, described as a tension made between bodily attraction and abstraction, has become the essential material of artistic performances and its creators. Paying respect to primordial bodies, impurity and concrete gesticulation can be observed as a reaction to the privilege given to bodily functions of representation all up to the first decades of the 20th century.

⁹ The thing that differs such gatherings from the real ritual communities is the non-existence of coercion and violence over those outside of them. Still, even though the community is based upon aesthetic principles, its members experience it as a social one, and the collision of an individual and the group can even turn into a conflict.

¹⁰ "The cry of a frightened child, the moaning of grief, the scream of pain, the gasp of terror, and other phatic expressions – as well as the body configurations, gestures, and facial displays accompanying these – probably constitute universal signals; yet each culture, each family, each person plays this pan-species repertory with singular skill, manipulating meaning and effect." Richard Scheckner, *Performance Theory* (New York, London: Routledge, 2005), 211.

¹¹ "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality." Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York, London: Routledge, 1990), 136.

The human body does not equal a theater artifact but is second to such an ideally-set notion, being in that way an essential aesthetic material. Paradoxically, living body which is constantly in a process of transformation and becoming defies the basic aesthetic law of objectivation, refusing any attempt to turn itself into an art piece. An actor's body is hence in a constant state of tension between its phenomenal and semiotic nature. The phenomenal and semiotic body are inseparably linked and cannot appear one without the other, even though the phenomenal one has a kind of priority since it can be conceived without the semiotic – that not being the case vice versa. As Erika Fischer-Lichte states, favoring one of these two bodily aspects can be historically traced through the work of actors and, from the beginning of the 20th century, theater directors.¹²

From the viewers' perspective, the experience of the liminal situation destabilizes the sense of self, other and world in general, articulating itself cognitively and somatically. In anthropology, transformation leads to the changes in social status and identity of the one in a rite of passage, but also of the society in whole. Even though transformation in artistic performances is itself a means to an end, each self-exposure represents the exposure of certain 'ethics of performing' as well, and some scholars like Reinelt hope for it not to be the furthest reach of transformative aesthetics –

[...] The audience is being constantly hit by theater ideas. If we see this as a developing action – not an action represented but the actual action belonging to the theater itself – we will realize the sense in which performance can be, but not necessarily is, performative. The theater has the capacity to hit as well as to cultivate, to treat people like cabbage, to represent the state leaving the viewers unchanged and not doing anything else but mere imitating the empire of the imperial.¹³

The change implied here is not the one of an anthropological sort, but is also not as short-termed as the performance is – following the logic of relational aesthetics, long-term change, though not in status and probably not in broader social terms, can happen.

Spatiality and tonality

For the purpose of this paper, we need to pay closer attention to two more specific elements of a performance, namely spatiality and tonality. Spatiality always fluctuates and can be constantly changed by physical movements, while its atmosphere has the possibility of infiltrating recipients' bodies via light, noise and scents. To an even bigger extent, tonality comes from corporeality – not only that the sound penetrates the body and affects it psychologically, but physicality also creates vocality;

¹² Fischer-Lichte, The Routledge Introduction to Theater and Performance Studies, 101.

¹³ Reinelt, Politics and Performing Arts, 378.

in an actor's voice, as part of his corporeality, all three forms of materiality are combined – physicality, spatiality and tonality. Tonality does not include just the verbalized aspects of a performance – the tension between the voice and language can be seen as analogue to the tension between the phenomenal and semiotic body. Certain authors, like Aleksandra Jovićević, perceive performance as more semiotically than visually organized whose 'textures' are always directed toward an active liberation of the imaginative energy that is weakening in the contemporary world of passive visual consumption. According to that view, performance would be an intersection of the organized representation and everyday life, with the awareness of role-playing being its most important part.

Vox Dei - Civil Disobedience: A dramatic text

Given theoretical postulates can very well serve to explain the semioticity of one of the most recent examples in the sphere of Serbian political theater. Zlatko Paković is one of Serbia's renowned theater directors who has staged shows in the mainly non-institutional theater scene, and *Vox Dei – Civil Disobedience* is one of his last plays, both written and staged, that premiered on Good Friday, April 19, 2019. Its date of premiere was closely connected to its content and subtitle, namely, 'theological-political miracle play'. It is openly political, having Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić and Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić as dramatis personae, and dealing with the unresolved murder of a Serbian politician from Kosovo, Oliver Ivanović.

The play's script is very precise yet fluid, relying upon intertextual structure. It uses some of the dramatic techniques of ancient Greek drama and epic theater, which is most noticeable in the type of characters to which certain lines are ascribed, some of them being concrete references to real persons (as in case of the politicians mentioned), and some ('first actor', 'second actor', 'first shadow', 'second shadow', including 'chorus' followed by music) just the epitomes of certain social structures such as citizens and state intelligence and security agencies. The play's intertextual parts include several references from Serbian literary and political history, as well as some globally-known political and philosophical works.

The play is divided into four scenes: "Transvesty – donated suits", "Transubstantiation – a suit makes a corpse", "Look how the blood gushes out of our conscience!" and "The Special Court for the Fight against Organized Governmental

¹⁴ Aleksandra Jovićević, Ana Jovanović, *Uvod u studije performansa* (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2007), 5.

Crimes", containing 9 songs,¹⁵ with 'no ending'.¹⁶ The last scene depicts an imaginary trial led by a late judge killed in October 2000 for many representatives of the executive, legislative and judicial powers on accusations including murder, electoral crimes, money laundry and jeopardizing territorial integrity. It also includes a sudden president's repentance when hearing his lawyer comparing him to a Jesus Christ, he tries to redeem himself. Metatheatrical parts have strong didactic implications, claiming that the "theater is the only institution where resurrection is indeed possible"¹⁷ and that the "theater is an intervention of imagination into reality. And imagination is the most human of all the human features. Therefore it is possible in theater for villains to realize their malice, to be ashamed in front of themselves and to ask forgiveness from others. Theater can be a teacher for a society and its future."¹⁸ Paković's media statements similarly claim that "we have entered a dangerous zone"¹⁹ for the show "to do what the society is disabled for […] set trials, with full names and surnames and full responsibility".²⁰

Stage directions assume seven performers on stage, three musicians (a drummer, guitar and trumpet players), three actors and one actress. The show is seen to begin as a concert "on behalf of disempowered citizens, dethroned working class, the unemployed, humiliated, those being robbed for decades, fed with lies, tired of living"²¹

Vox Dei – Civil Disobedience as an outdoor performance: 'the free zone'

The street performance *Vox Dei – Civil Disobedience* was performed on May 7, 2019 at Andrić's Square in Belgrade. This square is located in the city center, belonging to the municipality of Stari Grad. Its name derives from the name of the only Yugoslav Nobel Prize winner in literature Ivo Andrić, whose statue was erected at the square. The presidential palace Novi Dvor is also situated at this square, with the National Assembly in close vicinity.

The political situation in Serbia in 2019 has been rather unstable with anti-government protests, including civil marches around Andrić's Square, happening every

¹⁵ Ouverture "Oh you Serbia, our pale Mother" (based upon Brecht's *Germany*); "Ones for the eternal life, others for disgrace", based upon the *Book of the prophet Daniel*; "Murdered is he who had not obeyed" (based upon Brecht's *At Death of a Peacefighter*); "What are we waiting for?" (upon Brecht's *Completely in Charge*); "The right to Rebellion, for blood has boiled out of the soil" (upon Filip Višnjić's *The Beginning of the Revolt Against Dahijas*, and Njegoš's *The Mountain Wreath*); "A Note on Freedom" (based upon Božidar Grujović's poem and the 1805 Constitutional Draft on Secon Serbia Uprising); "Oh you Serbia among revolts" (based upon Dositej Obradović's *Arise*, *Serbia* and Oskar Davičo's *Serbia*). All references in the brecket has been made in the *Vox Dei* performance play's script by the author, Zlatko Paković.

¹⁶ Zlatko Paković, "Vox Dei - Civil disobedience," Danas, 30th April - 2nd May issue, 2019: 3.

¹⁷ Ibid, 2.

¹⁸ Ibid, 3.

¹⁹ "Zlatko Paković: Ulazimo u opasnu zonu – Šta čekamo?", Danas, 24th April 2019.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Paković, "Vox Dei - Civil Disobedience," 1.

Saturday for the first couple of months.²² After accusing the ruling party and government of misconduct and abuse of the Assembly as an institution, several opposition parties decided to boycott its work, erecting a tent called 'The Free Zone' in the park across the Assembly, at Andrić's Square.²³ The show was performed as part of cultural activities of 'The Free Zone'.²⁴

The architecture and urban structure of the square greatly influenced the atmosphere of the performance. The stage was set in a narrow passage that connects the square's park with one of Belgrade's busiest streets Kralja Milana, right next to the sidewalk with presidential Novi Dvor on its immediate left. The stage was elevated about two meters from the ground, for the improvised grandstands, or, potentially, security reasons. Grandstands were actually chairs placed only in front of the stage, while all the other sides of the stage were unoccupied. The performers were facing the audience, with their backs to the sidewalk and lanes. Besides spotlights, the light was coming from the street lights and cars passing by. Except for a couple of men in the fluorescent vests, no other guards were visible. The performing space was seemingly open for anyone to join.

This loose staging brought about the immense intensity of spatiality. People in the audience were constantly moving, as a vast number of them were standing. They occupied the parts of the surrounding buildings transforming them into theatrical space, making a question of an 'institution', art or political one, even more prevailing. The performers, who more than once climbed down into this space, used their bodily movements to make the viewers move, which was aligned with the main semiotic layer of the play, citizens' passiveness. Even though tonality mostly consisted of loud music coming from the stage, constant whispers, comments on current events, sighs but also car sirens emphasized the level of contingency, changing the rhythm but as well adding to the semiotic sense of urgency and necessity of reacting in the circumstances of poor media freedom. Freedom of speech distinguished itself as one of the main performative layers in this type of spatiality.

Vox Dei – Civil Disobedience as an indoor performance: The safe zone

An indoor performance was held on May 15, 2019, in the Congress Hall of the municipality of Stari Grad, one of a few in Serbia not governed by the Serbian Progressive Party. *Vox Dei – Civil Disobedience* was a production of the Cultural Center of this municipality, funded by the city.

Even though this space resembles more of a typical 'black box', it is still not theatrical in a strict, institutional sense. With it functioning primarily as a political chamber, it carries a lot of semantic connotations for the possible understandings of

²² Radio Television of Serbia, Protesti "1 od 5miliona" širom Srbije," 22nd March 2019.

²³ Radio Television of Serbia, "Protest u Beogradu, proglašena 'Slobodna Zona," 4th May 2019.

²⁴ "Aplauzi krvavim kostimima," Danas, 8th May 2019.

the play. In order to be present at this performance, one should have bought a ticket first, and then passed through the security gates at the entrance. If the open space we discussed previously was externally marked as 'The Free Zone, this closed space could be described as 'the safe zone'.

Being completely closed and quite small, this space created a certain intimate atmosphere which was quite contradictory to the explosiveness performers were trying to achieve. The stage was small in dimensions and very low, leaving almost no space between musicians, actors and the audience. The audience was seated the whole time, without the possibility to move, and the performers who were coming off the stage had to follow already established stairway paths. Unlike the case of the previous performance held in the natural darkness, here the light was completely artificial and throughout the show switched on, supporting the disillusioning effect. Tonality was mostly consisting of the sounds coming from the stage, without the interference of any outer noise.

Discussion

The corporeality in these performances was the most striking through the sounds performers made. Performers' voices were building rhythm together with the instruments and predominantly sharp, excessive moves, like the atmosphere they were trying to create. Contrary to the Hegelian idealistic aesthetics, relational aesthetics inevitably operates on questions of ideology and utopia by dealing with 'renewable' or 'trained' human behavior and subsequently 'cracks of sociability' between a subject and action. Some authors conclude that the performance makes the cultural inscription visible on and through the performing body. Like palimpsest, semiotic body shows the way a culture works.²⁵ The more the attention is put on an exchange of corporeal techniques, the more the performance becomes historical and political. Fischer-Lichte explicitly links the truthfulness of performance to bodily co-presence.²⁶ Speaking about the presence of the actors' bodies on stage (the intensity of which changes along with the actors' abilities to control the space of performance) she defines a radical presence by the circulating energy that leads to an 'embodied mind' as a transforming power. And performers of both these performances did make their presence radical.

Nonetheless, power relations through bodily co-presence refracted also by negotiation of the traditional subject-object relation. Performance is always a social process founded in certain rules that do not attract much attention until disobeyed or changed. This social process becomes political when the power struggle among the performers and the viewers or their subgroups begins. There is no such thing as passive participation in performance because the presence itself implies a certain

²⁵ Jovićević, Jovanović, *Uvod u studije performansa*, 86.

²⁶ Fischer-Lichte, The Transformative Power of Performance, 34.

consent. This is important because it puts the idea of 'manipulation', that can only partially explain an event, especially political one, at stake. These two performances included different types of people with different levels of involvement – performers who were completely devoted to the show regardless of its spatiality; the viewers who were devoted to the semiotic content, more or less dependent on the spatiality; the participants who were primarily dependent on spatiality. The third subgroup of the audience was completely absent in an indoor performance, while it was greatly contributing to the outdoor one – pedestrians stopping by or people swearing from cars in motion were constantly challenging not only the interweaving of the audience's two orders of perceptions but also the expected semioticity of the staging. If we accept the preconception that the community is made during theater act, a process of redefining relations among community members must be constantly happening. Concepts and ideas that we understand as dichotomies – autonomy and determinism, presence and representation – crumble down as opposites.²⁷ The question of the effect artistic performances have on viewers indeed is ethical and political as much as aesthetic, and the outdoor performance did show the potential of being a "new form of social co-existence"28. Regardless of the performance type, aesthetic, social and political aspects take turn through power relations. In that regard, given that the majority of politicians accused in the play belong to the ruling parties, and that the politicians from the opposition parties were present in the audience, ²⁹ these performances take the struggle among social groups involved to a much higher level than visible at first glance, on the level of pure bodily co-presence. Even though lines in the text say that "no pal will go for a pal, no politician will go for a politician"30 and stage directions envision bloody shirts of public figures murdered in the last decades³¹ fluttering like 'the flags of our Republic' in the 'Belgrade wind'32, the power struggles makes a production and subsequent performances very much differing from the textual semiotic layers.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Erika Fisher Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance: Different States of Being in Between," *TEX-TURES*, August 11, 2010: 16.

²⁹ "Aplauzi krvavim kostimima."

³⁰ Zlatko Paković, "Vox dei – Civil disobedience," *Danas*, 30th April – 2nd May issue (2019): 2.

³¹ Judge Nebojša Simeunović, politicians Ivan Stambolić, Zoran Đinđić and Oliver Ivanović, journalists Dada Vujasinović, Slavko Ćuruvija and Milan Panić.

³² Paković, "Vox dei - Civil disobedience," 3.

Conclusion

Anglo-American theory differentiates performativity from theatricality, first being in action when, in theater or life, mimetic aspects of representation are denied. Aldo Milohnić³³ and Aleksandra Jovićević³⁴ state that theater art has too easily accepted Austin's claim that theater phrases do not have performative power. Derrida, as well, posed a question whether an everyday life performative utterance is, in fact, stage performative utterance's parasite by analyzing illocution and iterability of the latter. The discrepancy between the semioticity of the text and performances is most detectable on an example seemingly overseen judging from the reactions of commenting audience - the dramatic text did not put a gun used to kill the character of Oliver Ivanović in president's Vučić's character's hands. Staging, with actors switching from one role to another without major shifts in costumes or gestures intentionally contributed to the prevailing opposite conclusion, but the ultimate semiotic analysis was left to the audience. There was no verdict. The fact that the outdoor audience followed the act of repentance of Aleksandar Vučić's character with exuberant silence and the indoor audience did it with the reckless laughter once again affirmed the importance of spatiality in shaping performances that tend to function as procedures of advocating and constructing reality rather than simply showing it by commenting on it.

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³³ Aldo Milohnić, Teorije savremenog teatra i performansa (Belgrade: Orion Art, 2013), 126.

³⁴ "In this way it can be concluded that Austin, by not even knowing it, set the central problem of the performative of a performance: the conventionality of an art institution that defies the introduction of performative on stage and discourages it by turning it immediately into an 'as if-performative." Jovićević, Jovanović, *Uvod u studije performansa*, 60.

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