

TO REFRAIN

‘Among ourselves in confidence, we freely admit that Josephine’s singing, qua singing, represents nothing out of the ordinary.’¹

‘Isn’t it perhaps, after all, simply squeaking? And squeaking is something we know all about...the special skill of our own people...not even a skill so much as a typical sign of life...We all squeak, though of course no one thinks of passing it off as art...we squeak without paying any attention to the fact...’²

‘...she denies any connection between her art and squeaking...sitting in front of her one knows what she is squeaking is no mere squeaking.’³

‘...this nothing voice, this negative achievement asserts itself and finds a way through to us;...’⁴

‘...here squeaking is freed from all the trammels of everyday life...’⁵

At the end, Kafka’s end, art’s ever-renewed ending, there was, still is, Josephine.

Josephine: the performer whose performing, apparently (for a time though only for a time) crucial to the gathering of the mouse people, yet hovering unplaceably between silence, squeaking (the commonsense of the mouse-world) and singing (art), confounds all their and our attempts to grasp (her) art and its ‘content’, art-as-performance, in its becoming. Through Josephine, Kafka shows the mouse people (and us) as living within and by the open question of performing’s (art’s) very possibility. By the end of the ‘story’ (in this case surely much more than we have any right to expect from something that is ‘just’ a story...) neither we nor they ‘know’ whether Josephine’s singing, art-ing, ever happened. For performing’s fate (Josephine’s, art’s, Kafka’s, and ours), endlessly reiterated, refrained, is to be the enactment of its own incompleteness, its being the outside of identity. It is, it becomes, itself only in its recession from all attempts to fix it, make it stable, in a place-time, *to give it a proper name*.

As represented by Kafka’s spokes(mouse)person-narrator this performance-in-question offers itself on each occasion as its own confounding, as only the possibility of an event, an event-in-waiting, the shadow of an event always yet to come. Indeed it (though ‘it’ still does not have the qualities and limits of an already formed and definable ‘it’) will only turn into an event, the emergence or happening of the art thingamajig, when the mouse people and we deem it to have ‘taken place’ after all. But this very deeming condemns it to being no more than a memory, now identified as a completed event with a given ‘place’ in our past, something that no longer continues to e-vent (to come-out) for us in its still vibrating incoherence and put our present into question.

¹ Franz Kafka, ‘Josephine the Singer, or The Mouse People’ in ‘Stories, 1904-1924’, Macdonald, London, 1981, pp. 253-4

² *ibid.*

³ *op. cit.*, p. 255.

⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 261.

⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 264.

Josephine's squeaking performance is incongruent with, it challenges, what we take for granted, what we thought we knew and felt, about the performing of art. It appears before and to the mouse people (us) as some kind of celebration crucial to their gathering, to their becoming a people. Yet it is nothing definable, identifiable. Simultaneously an offering-withholding, it celebrates the singer-squeaker's self-belief in the need to put singing (art) on the line, in question without end. The squeaker-singer hopes that the ways she shapes the question of singing will, in that gesture, also project her performance as the answer to its own questioning, that she will exemplify singing itself and, in so doing, might just be able to withdraw her audience (the people) from themselves, taking them up to the threshold of their becoming as a people. Of course we soon find that the (mouse)people will have none of it. Yet, throughout, Josephine continues in the hopeful expectation that, through her singing-in-question, the people may find (establish?) themselves anew.

The very point of her shaped questioning (once we could be certain that it had actually 'taken place'...), always for a people's gathering, is to offer the people the chance to move out of their familiar comforts and habits of an everyday squeaking that just confirms what the people think they (we) already know about the way things and they (we) are. And because she is after all recognisably only squeaking (is she?) the people do assemble for her performances:

'Of course it is squeaking. How should it be anything else? Squeaking is the language of our people; it is only that some squeak their whole life through without knowing it, whereas here squeaking is freed from all the trammels of everyday life and so, for a short while, sets us free too. Oh no, we would not miss those performances for anything.'⁶

But in the end, of course, the people will not have it. They seem to 'know' implicitly that their latent possibilities, what and how they might become, have little or nothing to do with the actual intentions of Josephine or any performer. Kafka knows that the void between everyday (common)sense and potential things-for-art is unbridgeable; of course this doesn't stop him from leaping out across that void - borne on this occasion by Josephine - and writing it into becoming...

Josephine's concerns about her working conditions and the mouse people's response to her singsqueaking and her requests (to be released from communal work, to enhance her performance, to fight for her rights, to 'shorten her coloratura' and her songs, to succumb to tiredness and mood-swings, and, finally, to decline to sing, to disappear⁷) are rooted in the mundane realities of the people's daily life. Through these concerns Kafka shows us that, while being just another mouse, Josephine simultaneously and without quite knowing how she does it, seems to become a catalyst for the people's possibilities. Her shaping of the performance-as-quest in all its ambivalence is quite independent of these mundane interests. Through Josephine, Kafka writes us right up to the edges of the people and of what the art thingamajig might be. Then he cuts it loose, suspending it in front of us, beyond our grasp and judgment.

And how extraordinary that in this his final 'story', proof-read by him but published only after his death, Kafka should offer us his, and still perhaps our, most succinct and ever-more prescient exploration of art's, the artist's and thus our, Janus-faced plight, its and our predicament and pledge. It seems that, at the last, his entire life-as-writing (the novels, the short stories, the paradoxical parables, the diaries, the letters, the insurance reports) had

⁶ op. cit., p. 264

⁷ op. cit., pp. 268-70

guided him to the moment when, in sight of the end, he could write out for himself and us an absolutely singular dire-gnosis of art's and our defining crisis, a devastating write-out that, precisely because it comes from within and is on behalf of art, renders all crisis-theorising superfluous, superfluous that is to the performing of gests-for-art and to our attempts to engage them on their own terms so that we might situate our selves within them on the plane of their making. This is indeed a plane of struggle. Returning us to art's relation to 'to give' and the 'gift', Blanchot suggests that this defines Kafka's ambiguous gift to us: 'What Kafka gives us - the gift we do not receive - is a sort of combat for literature through literature: a struggle which is - and is at the same time escaped by - its aim'.⁸ To allow the play of the writing to draw us into this struggle through the utterly unfixable and paradoxical dynamics of the mouse people's relation to Josephine's singsqueak, is to real-ise for ourselves, quite aside from all attempted periodisings of art's 'life' (the slicing up of Art's Body into multiple pre-, early-, late, and post-modernisms for example...), art as both unavoidable crisis and 'combat', now and foreseeably. Art, its 'elsewhere-Body', becomes ('lives') in and as its struggle with its own ungraspable passing away. Making-toward-art (Josephine's performing...) makes something 'appear' *whose very becoming is an event of disappearance; the almost instantaneous passing away of music's sounds exemplifies art's inextricable tie to mortality.*⁹

Kafka's writing exemplifies, on and in its own inimitable terms, art's innate ability, its tendency (how it forces something through with our collaboration), to take us to the places some kinds of theorising would like to attain but forever condemn themselves to fall well short of. Kafka, uttering differently, searches out and discloses these sites in unique ways which both anticipate and outstrip critical attempts to construct and lay out structures of the everyday world in terms of typicality and generality. By being utterly specific, art's gests get there first, but always to a 'there' disappearing as theorising reaches out for it. And they make this 'there' in idiosyncratic singularities, through their unique idioms. They see through to and shape what gives the plane of everyday living its consistency and its reasoned relations, leaving us to elide them (or not) with our own experiences. Precisely by setting aside the necessary self-distancing strategies and procedures of analytical construction (the recipes for generalising, typifying, rule-locating and explaining) art's gests take us to the surfaces' heartless heart in their own vision-dependent ways. They lodge themselves in-between and beyond the bits and pieces whose frail linkages make up our everyday surfaces. Exploring these gaps and fractures, they confront and seek to find terms for the obscurities by-passed by analysis's abstraction from and glosses of the bitty surfaces. Art reveals and finds its pointless point in these gaps. For it, the obscure is the thinnest of cements that gives surfaces whatever slight bonding capacity they have.

When we take the arts' gests on their own terms, allowing ourselves to be taken in by them, we become embedded in these nearly-spaces simultaneously losing and finding ourselves (a vaguely secure but disturbing abandonment) quite aside from all theorising. We are left (we leave some of our selves behind at art's threshold) to find their and our ways through and out of these holes. Inveigled by their attractions (the traction which grips us) we are borne into and along the movement, the planing, of becoming itself. Because, sucked into these gaps, we are inserted into the very material of this becoming by being in its midst, we real-ise this

⁸ Maurice Blanchot, 'The Writing of the Disaster', trans. A. Smock, University of Nebraska, London, 1986, p.141.

⁹ The composer Michael Finnissey made this very point in relation to his quoting a madrigal by Gesualdo in a piece performed at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, 2013. He said that what he was 'edging toward' in the citation was 'mortality': 'Music dies as you utter it'. BBC Radio 3, 14.12.2013.

movement as our own, for ourselves alone (very much alone in those moments of becoming), as just for us. In contrast analytical writing deliberately withholds itself from this involvement and works on behalf of the typifications necessary for its own knowledges. Seeking to exemplify typicality, written for a typical reader, we can never make it our own, never become and discover ourselves through giving those selves up to its movement. In our reading of it we already abandon our particularity in order to become a general typical reader, just one of its crowd, getting ‘the same’ out of it as everyone else, necessarily held back from the flow of becoming, from the plunge into the obscure.

By contrast, art’s point is to enable us to real-ise our own latent possibilities through drawing us onto and into the flow’s absolute particularity. In his late stories, and most extraordinarily in ‘Josephine...’, Kafka offers us a writing in which his own, our own, Josephine’s own, and art’s own possibilities of becoming, of living-on, *are now entwined with the realities and possibilities of disappearance*, of whether art can still become. For Kafka, art’s fate is forever in question and never more so than now. His ‘now’ has now become our now – we are his legatees. And Kafka lives and enacts art’s perennial pledge to put itself and its plight to the test once again and, as ever in utterly singular terms, specifically those in which Josephine’s and art’s (and our) undecidable fate is in question.

Of course Kafka’s writing does not offer us straightforward allegories encouraging us to treat their surface lines as coded cover jobs for some clear but hidden message just behind or aside from the lines. Rather its seduction lies exactly in the ways its words never cease to stop re-sounding, resonating within and for us. They gather us up, keep us suspended, unsettled, in their reverberations because these very reverberations perform irresolution and ambivalence. If we make the leap to a possible secreted other text (as here, for example, in ‘hearing’ Josephine’s disappearing squeaking as an allegory for art’s and the artist’s contemporary fate), we risk losing the very things that, comprising the text’s allure (here our becoming-mouse, our insertion into the all too convincing hardships and terrors, occasionally offset by tiny diversions (not least Josephine herself), of the mundane mouse-world), always divert us from the leap or, at the very least, undermine our conviction of its worth. It both is and is not the mouse world, is and is not our world. The text holds us hovering within itself, unable to close the alternations which comprise our movement through it.

Alongside ‘Josephine...’ in his last collection were three other stories, two of which (‘First sorrow’ and ‘A fasting-artist’) also take art (its reception and the situation of the artist) as their explicit motif. However we may choose to extend our interpretations and drift beyond their surfaces through substitutions, transpositions, projections, through these stories Kafka nevertheless writes into being writing’s, art-ing’s, own unavoidable dilemmas: writing with the furious agonised calm that had always constituted his writing life, his life-as-writing, he tracks around the meridian of his own predicament – how to explore, write-out, and show what it is to be consumed by and absolutely riveted to art(-as-writing) (all the time in thrall to family, job, illness, particular women and his own sexuality). At the culmination of his searching in these terminal tales he finds, writes through, three different trajectories of the artist’s, art’s, fate – its rise, decline and possible disappearance.

In the first, the artist as trapeze-artist, aloft night and day, hung up on his trapeze in the ‘almost invisibly remote heights’ of the ‘great variety theatres’ (and thus at the pinnacle of his career, on the celebrity circuit...), Kafka gives us a performer who suddenly realises that he can no longer perform unless he has a second trapeze: ‘Only the one bar in my hands –

how can I live like that!'.¹⁰ Kafka points us towards the profundity of this crisis of self-doubt, of confidence in self and materials, through the response of the trapeze-artist's manager who, noting the trapeze-artist's torment, sees with foreboding this 'threat to his very existence'.

The fate of the fasting- or hunger-artist echoes the end of Gregor Samsa in the earlier story 'Metamorphosis', whose 'completely flat and dry body had been disposed of by the charwoman'.¹¹ 'Metamorphosis' closes with Gregor's family visiting the 'open country' for the first time in months, where, 'at the end of their journey', Grete, Gregor's sister, 'sprang to her feet first and stretched her young body.'¹² Gregor's reversal of the evolutionary path ended in a 'state of vacant and peaceful meditation.'¹³ But the hunger-artist, caged and in a pile of rotten straw, fasts himself to death. With his last words he pleads for forgiveness for his now terminal fasting (his arting)..., explaining that, while he wanted admiration for his fasting, he couldn't help doing it, 'because I've never been able to find the kind of nourishment I like. If I had found it, believe you me, I'd not have made this fuss but would have eaten my fill the same as you and everyone else.'¹⁴ Following the fasting-artist's last words, 'this mess' (his body and the 'rotten straw' covering him) is removed from the cage in which he had displayed his fasting performances (themselves a steady decline from stardom (celebrity) into misery and disappearance), and the 'mess' is replaced by a 'young panther' that 'lacked nothing', and whose 'sheer delight at being alive made such a torch of the beast's breath that the spectators had difficulty in holding their ground against it.'¹⁵

The narratorial voice entwines the fasting-artist's fate with the declining interest in 'fasting as an art... in recent decades'. For there were now no more 'major performances' as when 'the whole city used to be involved in what the fasting-artist was doing.'¹⁶ From being 'an apparently brilliant success, held in universal esteem',¹⁷ a 'distaste for exhibition fasting had set in everywhere.'¹⁸ Too old and too dedicated to give up fasting, he signed on with a 'big circus' and his cage was placed in a narrow passageway near the stables where even the stragglers 'strode rapidly past, almost without a sideways glance...' He was 'no more than an obstacle on the way to the stables... a minor obstacle and growing smaller all the time.'¹⁹ People had become accustomed to his strangeness and this sealed his fate, for, although he was fasting as well as ever, 'You try explaining fasting to someone! Unless a person feels it he can never be made to understand it.'²⁰ Subject as ever to ridicule and charges of fraud, he succeeded 'without difficulty in accomplishing precisely what he had ... said he would accomplish.'²¹ And what he accomplishes (the pinnacle of his art) of course is his fast into and as oblivion.

¹⁰ op. cit., p. 233.

¹¹ F. Kafka, 'Metamorphosis and Other Stories', Penguin, London, 1963, pp. 60-62.

¹² op. cit., p. 63.

¹³ op. cit., p. 58.

¹⁴ 'Stories...', op. cit., pp. 251-2.

¹⁵ ibid., p. 252.

¹⁶ ibid., p. 242.

¹⁷ ibid., p., 246.

¹⁸ ibid., p., 248.

¹⁹ ibid., p. 250.

²⁰ ibid.

²¹ ibid., p. 251.

Kafka here offers us art (and the artist) dedicated to performance, but performance as a self-shrinking, a becoming-less, perhaps even beyond the minimal, in effect to its own disappearance. And it is a performing (let us include in this every kind of making-for-art across the arts) which, after enjoying some ‘success’ (public acclaim), is abandoned by the ‘pleasure seeking masses’²² for whom the fasting-artist had been ‘no more than a joke with which they went along for the sake of fashion.’²³ Unable to find what nourishes it, this art dedicates itself to its ending, its fading away. Kafka vests his hope not in the possibility of resuscitating this art but, perhaps, in a different art, pointed to both in his own writing and in the élan of the panther ‘endowed almost to bursting point with all it required’ and carrying its freedom ‘around with it – somewhere in the teeth apparently.’²⁴ We suspect, of course, that the coming performances of the panther, now caged (caught in entertainment's frame), will follow the same trajectory as those of the fasting-artist, the trapeze-artist and Josephine. For Kafka that is the lot of art-in-general and every artist. This is Kafka’s final refrain, the distilled chorus, repeated tellingly, in between the words of these ending ‘verses’.

Nevertheless, that all making-for-art, whether performed in public or private and whatever its destination (secure placement or disappearance), is exactly a ‘performance’ for Kafka, offers us a key to his understanding of the relation between the arts’ gests and the culture in which they are sent forth. For it seems that, for him, it is exactly the actions done in the name of art and dedicated to it (art as performative) that make a thing a gest-for-art, that make all the difference in the world. The quality of the gest is critically dependent upon the kind of gesture, the performance, that the gest embeds, that it ‘is’: the reconstructable gesture that constituted its being performed. If we cling to ‘Josephine...’ as an almost-allegory for art’s contemporary plight and the mouse-narrator as the medium for Kafka’s diagnosis of art and its current possibilities, then we can find in one short passage an extraordinary prescience and insight into the ways, across the arts, performers began to explore and re-site the relation between their gests and the commonsense world of everyday life. The mouse-narrator shows us, through Josephine, that it is exactly commonsense, art’s relation to the normal (the taken-for-granted, the given...), that is at stake in art’s quest for itself. In each of the arts, now radically secularised across the modern movements and their after-wards, the recurring questions for performers have concerned the relation between their sensual perceptions and their possible materials (what their medium-specific or cross-media ‘raw’ materials might be), and how this conjunction might be the site for the origination of something unique, of, hopefully, a revelation-in-wonder as ‘art’ (and nothing else), of that which had previously been taken-for-granted. The questions that these things always raise, their eternal refrain, is ‘Is art still possible and, if so, is this thing, can this thing, be art?’

Posing these questions always entails a confrontation with the ever-present question of the makers’ relation to their ‘raw materials’ – their sourcings’ relation to the cultural givens, the circumstances, which enfold both them and the art traditions to which their performances are always a response. At issue is the possibility of detachment, of the ways the would-be-art-gest might assert its ‘purity’/autonomy as art through detaching itself from the cultural givens. It is the latter which makers turn into their ‘raw materials’ to be, in turn, turned out of themselves and re-turned as strange things, cultural-unrecognisables, through the differences that detachment makes. This is always, being art, a detachment suffused and directed by that seemingly incompatible combine of felt-thought, of passion and unreasonable reasoning.

²² *ibid.*, p. 248.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 242.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 252.

In the following passage about Josephine's possible singing and its relation to her audience, it is almost as if Kafka had had a lightning glimpse of the entire spectrum of the arts of his time and those to come (from R.Mutt's signed ceramic²⁵ onwards), in their troubled and troubling relation to the 'normality' of their encasing culture:

'to understand her art it is necessary not only to hear her but also to see her...there is already something special about a person making a formal appearance in order to do merely what is normal. Cracking open a nut can hardly be called art; consequently no one is going to assemble an audience, stand up in front of it, and seek to entertain it by cracking nuts. If he does so none the less, and if he succeeds in his purpose, there has to be more involved than mere nutcracking. Or it is only nutcracking that is involved but it turns out that we have been overlooking this art, being past masters of it, and that it has taken this new nutcracker to show us what it is really about, the point being that the effect might even be enhanced if the person concerned were a marginally less competent cracker of nuts than most of us.'²⁶

Thus, the recurring question that making-for-art puts to itself (at least if it is being absolutely modern...) is: Might this making-for make a difference? Or, is this thing the same (as everyday life, as the normal, as commonsense), or is it, however minutely but hopefully, different (just, but perhaps *only just*, art)? We are reminded of the parable of the messianic world-to-come (recounted by Agamben (via Scholem, Benjamin and Bloch) in which, 'Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.'²⁷ The arrival of the Absolute, of paradise, requires only the tiniest displacement of everything, but a displacement that makes all the difference in (and to) the world. Given our eternal deferment of the Absolute by all the means at our now considerable disposal, perhaps art's ever so slight displacements, barely noticeable, almost nothing, are the most we can hope for in our infernal mean time. Perhaps this is the inner gesture, the art-thing-as-performance, that art's gests articulate as their endless refrain.

The plight of the performing is to be singing a song, this very singing itself being an affirmation of art-as-hope, which is unrecognisable in the terms of everyday 'understanding' (the ordinary search for 'meaning') precisely because its very point is to turn this everyday understanding out of itself on behalf of other ways of becoming. And its fate is to be singing this refrain (the refrain being that which is repeated every time in each new, unique performance/thing – the gest's eternal refrain, its pledge to try to be just art) in places where it cannot be 'at home'; it is made to perform in places that are not, cannot be, *its* places. It *tries* to happen but cannot quite take place, cannot make its own place. The culture of course is perfectly happy with it where it is, that is, where it has already placed the arts, where it can keep its eye on them. Yet, in performers' terms, such spots (where they have been pitched in their plight) can only ever be treated as thresholds, edges, margins, border-lands and -lines, that they are condemned to wander through without being able to settle down on their hither side, within the places that they surround. Like 'K.', the 'land surveyor' in Kafka's 'The Castle' and the man from the country in his 'Before The Law', they never get in past the walls and the protected entrances, *never become insiders*. For the maker the only 'place' is in and as the thing made - the gest - and this is itself the forming of a margin, an edgy something which is at, without ever occupying, what Jabès calls 'the blurred confines of being'.²⁸ The thing itself creates its place, hesitantly and always only with some help from a

²⁵ See the later discussion of this in 'To Risk'.

²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 254-5.

²⁷ G. Agamben, 'The Coming Community', University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 52.

²⁸ E. Jabès, 'The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion', Stanford University, Stanford, 1996, p. 32.

rapt attendant. As Jabès writes of the writer, “I have no place,” as you might say, “I have no ties,” knowing all the time that every word creates its place.’²⁹

These marginal spots, barely visible (thrust upon us, partially possessing us, though not possessed by us) for ‘our’ culture, offer something very tiny to ‘the people’ (an amorphous aggregate without identity, though infinitely sub-dividable by analysts of many persuasions); this something’s aim is to side-step, to short-(or long-)circuit, the frames within which both the gests and the people have been set. It hopes that its refrain, its repeated gest, will be taken up by the people at some time to come when they are ready to follow the thing’s example of detachment, of cultural self-dispossession, to share the festive line’s release from the givens of the everyday. Not that the performer, caught up in the disquieting task of taking on the everyday on behalf of an unknowable, can see beyond the task to this time and this people to come. For the all-consuming intoxication of the task, the irrepressible impulse drawing her/him on with its always finally unfulfillable promise of happiness, consumes all available space-time energies. It was certainly such a spot that Kafka both found himself in and constructed for himself, doubtless in the hope that he too, just like Josephine’s ‘nothing voice, this negative achievement’, might find ‘a way through to us’, for she ‘affects us in ways that a true singer would seek in vain to do and that are granted solely and precisely to her poverty of resources.’³⁰ This very ‘poverty’ certainly articulates, and in most cases anticipates, the tactics, the art-defining ways of relating to and trying to site their ‘materials’, common to all the modern arts in their medium-specific practices. It entails the investigation of the ways in which the basic ‘components’ and ‘origins’ of their medium are to be found right there in the ready-to-hand materials they share with everyday practice. And, for all of them, performing’s investigations are to be carried out through a suspension of the rules and rhetorics shaping and constraining the traditions both within and against which they are performing and those constituting the routines of everyday life.

Across the modern arts’ media (and the movements both common to different media as well as those concentrated within specific media) the reiterated refrain each art thing still silently performs is that of stripping the medium’s materials down to their core, to only that which is necessary for each particular performing’s chance of being gathered to art, to Art’s Body, and then building, constructing, the would-be-art-gests with nothing but these core elements. And of course the core materials include whatever it is in the performer her- or him-self which irrepressibly drove the performing along its previously unknown pathways.

Certainly it was this double sense of the performer’s ‘task’, to find and perform only with those paradoxical materials which were both common to art and simultaneously unique to each performer, that defined Kafka’s relation to his life-as-writing: ‘Two tasks at the beginning of your life: to narrow your orbit more and more, and ever and again to check whether you are not in hiding somewhere outside your orbit.’³¹ For Kafka the task itself was all-embracing, life-consuming: ‘The fact that our task is exactly commensurate with our life gives it the appearance of being infinite.’³² But the overwhelming, life-defining, tensions that this task generates arise from the ineliminable split between art and life that every performer has to straddle. For, ‘The point of view of art and life are different even in the artist himself.’³³ And the effect of this division of viewpoints that the would-be artist lives within

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁰ ‘Stories...’, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

³¹ Franz Kafka, ‘The Blue Octavo Notebooks’, *Exact Change*, Cambridge, 1991, p. 42.

³² *ibid.*, p. 36.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 39.

is the latter's felt requirement, the task-to-come, to create the conditions within which the irrepressible urge might make its own way through to art, risking failure all along the way. For Kafka it is the latter threat which is ever present precisely because of the lack of an unequivocal available terrain from within which the making can proceed in some confidence. Guided neither by Christianity nor the 'hem of the Jewish prayer shawl'³⁴, he lacks the hereditary 'positive' from within which to make. This positive has to be created from scratch, risking failure as it goes, though this threat is not a result of 'inertia' or 'awkwardness'. Rather the confrontation with failure is due to, '...the lack of ground underfoot, of air, of the commandment. It is my task to create these, not in order that I may then, as it were, catch up with what I have missed, but in order that I shall have missed nothing, for the task is as good as any other. It is indeed the most primal task of all, or at least the reflection of that task... And this is no exceptional task, either; it is sure to have been set often before. True, I don't know whether it has been set to such a degree. I have brought nothing with me of what life requires, so far as I know, but only the universal human weakness. With this – in this respect it is gigantic strength – I have vigorously absorbed the negative element of the age in which I live, an age that is, of course, very close to me, which I have no right ever to fight against, but as it were a right to represent.'³⁵ Lacking the positives of a clear placement within established belief systems, 'I am an end or a beginning.'³⁶ Or, if we want to hear this as a more interesting (in its retention of the ambivalent alternative) precursor of Eliot's 'In my beginning is my end'³⁷, *both at once*, thus offering us a succinct statement of the modern arts' vision of their relationship to (their) time, while recognising (perhaps uniquely amongst his contemporaries) the oxymoronic quality of that position's weakness as its strength. Kafka's clear-sighted vision of contemporary performing's plight – its groundless beginning in weakness accompanied by the spectre of failure – shows the quality of the task to be engaged as a matter of performing's commitment.

This necessary never-being-quite-sure, performing's uncertainty principle supporting its commitment to doubt, is a refrain often veiled by the obvious conviction of the surfaces of modern performances which may give few if any clues as to the ambivalence out of which they emerged. And perhaps these seemingly sure surfaces only get to be that way through the unstoppable urge to perform which somehow surges past the doubts, carried through by something, some force, which comes from the no-where that side-lines the controls of the everyday self, or as Kafka puts it, 'Not shaking off the self, but consuming the self.'³⁸ This consuming involves making oneself into 'an inert mass...to yield to the non-conscious that you believe far away while it is precisely what is burning you.'³⁹ But this 'burning', what became an easily recognisable 'concentration in me of all my forces on writing' and which he locates as his 'purpose' in being consumed by writing, is not something that he found 'independently and consciously', rather 'it found itself, and is now interfered with only by the office, but that interferes with it completely.'⁴⁰ The crucial move was that of learning to recognise and liaise with the concentration of forces as if it were indeed something independent of his everyday self, a concentration in which 'he' was brought into relations

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 52.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ T. S. Eliot, 'Four Quartets', Faber, London, 1959, p. 23.

³⁸ Kafka, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

³⁹ Franz Kafka, 'The Diaries of Franz Kafka', Penguin, London, 1972, p. 178.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 163.

with the ‘different subjects in one and the same human being.’⁴¹ Thus taken over, the doubts of questioning are displaced by the ensuing writing from elsewhere.

But these things from elsewhere, these things that the modern arts introduced into the culture as absolutely modern things, gests that in their very emergence within modernity both helped to define what it was (and in some ways still is for us), while paradoxically placing themselves beyond it, could not expect that their performances would call forth a refrain from the people. Or at least certainly not a refrain in harmony with and echoing, and thus confirming, the inner verse of their own making. This might be what the gests desired and needed (a positive response from their hoped-for audience), but their very thrust outwards beyond the culture’s edges ensured a general suspicion. For it was precisely the normality, the over-riding practical necessity, of the everyday, the people’s taken-for-granted world, which their gests subjected to the questions arising from their own plight. They risked undoing the everyday on behalf of something (an elsewhere) for which they hoped, but whose embodiment in the would-be-art-thing could never be guaranteed. For the hoped-for otherness required, of course, just as art always had, respondents willing to give themselves up to the gest. And when the gest’s very point is to perform the occult, to take the respondents out of their cultural securities, then this gest can expect incomprehension, anxiety, or hostility. The modern arts clung on in scattered pockets, relying on small minorities to sustain them at or below subsistence. Allied only in the loosest inconsequential way with others who distanced themselves from the everyday life of modernity, they retained their otherness at the cost of effect. Far from being with the people they barely reached them, except as puzzling curios or vaguely edgy threats.

Yet with the massification of modern culture, crucially generated by revolutionary technical innovations in the means of production and reproduction (especially the industrialisation of communication and the transmission of representations with their effects on and intimate ties to political economy) and the devastating effects of inter-state and global wars, the opportunity arose to both neutralise whatever threat the modern arts might be suspected of posing and absorb them into the cultural mainstream on behalf of enlightenment values (knowledge, humanism, tolerance and so on). The modern arts were steadily gathered up by the institutions responsible for cultural continuity and re-attached to the traditions from which they had seen themselves breaking away. Subject to hyper-commodification and continuous and rapid reinterpretation and representation by knowledge-based interests, the artists and their gests were stitched into completely new relations with their culture. Strung out across institutions responsible for managing heritage, education and entertainment, and financially controlled according to their potential for application and ‘relevance’, they were (are) allied to and associated with interests and practices that reconstituted their relations with potential audiences. Subject to mediation by technical experts (from academics and teachers to advertising and marketing consultants), their everyday life has been transformed as the terms of their accessibility (and thus their ‘significance’ and ‘value’) have been revolutionised. The arts’ gests, steadily and carefully de- and re-composed and re-sited by technical experts, became, from the standpoint of potential respondents, different kinds of objects.

Yet all the time their performers, though themselves necessarily partially re-formed as practitioners in their enmeshment in the institutional machinery effecting the transition from modernity to its later-wards, remained deeply bound up with and indebted to the romanticist-modernist vision of performing. The critical problem for the latter was and is still, how to

⁴¹ ‘Blue Octavo Notebooks...’, op. cit., p. 93.

reconcile the multiple self's irresistible urge to generate gests that show ('express') both the performer's erotic attachment to art's traditions and their otherness (to both tradition and the embracing culture), with external pressures trying to ensure that the performing is responsive to non-art interests. Though the pressures and their sources have been different to those of pre-modern and modern performing their effects are similar. Performing was and is still a site of irresolvable tension between autonomy and adulteration/dilution; it clings to the sense of its task as excavation of the buried selves in order to drag forth an original-something-on-the-way-to-art which will challenge, however slightly, the medium-specific 'language' conventions (thus requiring, a re-configuring of that 'language').

However, there is now an *institutionalised* refrain, though it is not sung, articulated, by the people. Once it is out in the public domain a gest may be subject to a battery of responses whose underlying refrain reiterates the interest of technical expertise (culture management) in treating it as an object of knowledge for purposes of evaluation and placement. The thing is surrounded, overlaid and invested by those discourses whose institutional responsibility is to represent it, to make it accessible, legible, to whatever segments of the people can be persuaded to relate to it in the institutions' contexts and terms. These embedded interests can only sing their own song, repeat their own eternal refrain, which reiterates the ways that the gest has to be reconstructed as an object of institutional knowledges. Mediated through these knowledges the arts' gests find that their relation to audiences has been framed in ways that ensure their subservience to the needs of their placement. Learning the appropriate refrain, audiences re-constitute the song of and for art as an autonomous probing of the 'givens' of art and culture into a plea for the acceptance of gests as bearers of the comforts of tasteful knowledges. It is difficult for the song to carry people to a radical elsewhere with this expectant refrain so firmly in place (let alone for it to contribute to re-shaping a people who might treat performing as an exemplary mode of becoming-experimental).

There is of course, given that 'refrain' is a homophonic homonym, that 'other' meaning of 'refrain', stemming not from the fragmenting of '*frangere*' (L.), but from the restraining of the horse's bridle ('*frenum*' (L.). This other 'refrain' proffers a refraining *from*, a holding back, a becoming-restrained and a curbing of one's response to... whatever. And such holding back may also have an affinity with the 'disappearing', the 'less-ness', that now marks making-for-art's relations to and in its chosen languages (whether medium-specific or multi-media). As with other qualities of making's performing 'life' now, it is Celan's poesis that focuses making's necessary reticence in relation to language. Discussing the 'thin zone' constituted by Celan's poems, Ziarek sees the 'innermost narrowness', with which Celan himself characterised this zone in his 'Meridian' essay, as the poem's 'strong tendency toward silence'. Probing for 'otherness' the poem 'already silences itself'. It 'refrains from words, from naming and compromising the other.'⁴² The 'other' for poetry, and thus for the other contemporary arts, cannot be named, pointed to, represented. And the 'other's' recession, retreat, even disappearance, in the face of language's persistence is precisely what making has to confront in its hoped-for encounter with 'otherness'. For this is a zone where 'things', lacking the identity required by the conventions of commonsense and knowledge's methods, recede from such appropriation. They call for a different relation to languaging where the maker has to fall into the fissures, that somehow sustain every language's infinitely fragile 'togetherness', in order to stammer forth in difference that for which our knowledges

⁴² Ziarek, K., 'Inflected Language : toward a hermeneutics of nearness', State University of New York, 1994, pp. 139-140.

have no place. Already Kafka's way in language and his entangling of art with disappearance begin to feel intimate with the reticence marking this other refraining.