

Space Oddity: Exercises in Art and Philosophy

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Performance Installation as a Haunted Landscape

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Abstract As humans today so often relate to people who are not physically present and to media governed by code, this essay proposes that in a performance without humans acting, the audience might find more sensory connection than with the human actor at the centre of it. Looking into what is left once the human actor is not present, this study will focus on the notion of hauntology and landscape and how the two might be entangled. It explores how past, present, and future come together in the space of a performance, as well as the notion of landscape as a model to organise our thoughts and performance setting. These notions are difficult to grasp. Perhaps only through practice, can we rehearse and come to further understanding.

Keywords Presence. Absence. Hauntology. Landscape. Non-human. Technology. Performance installation.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Hauntology. – 3 Actor. – 4 Performance. – 5 Landscape. – 6 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

Beginning with the title of this essay, several questions come to mind: what does it mean for an installation to perform, or to perform at all? How is performance connected to a landscape and what is more a haunted one? Who or what is haunting it?

The starting point of this essay is the relation between the notion of 'performance installation' and Derrida's concept of hauntology.¹ Hauntology explores the return of the elements from the past, in the manner of a ghost as well as the lingering of certain aspects of the future. Hauntology looks at the space between presence and absence, suggesting that the two can take place simultaneously. What I consider in this essay is the absence of human actor and what takes its place within a performance. Searching for a framework to situate the post-human performance, I explore the notion of landscape.

Landscape, as opposed to idyllic scenery, can be thought of as a template for the critical imagination and organisation of our thoughts and creative processes as well as elements in space. Landscape, in the context of contemporary theatre and performance, is here explored in the writing of Elinor Fuchs and Ana Vujanović, and dates back to Gertrude Stein's 'landscape plays'. It has to do with the 'spacing out' of spatial as well as discursive elements.

Throughout the article, I propose a connection between the notion of hauntology and looking at a performance space as a landscape. The indeterminate nature of the terms makes it more convenient to approach and entangle the two. This uncertainty embedded in them relates as well to the socio-political conditions of the twenty-first century. In this sense, this essay might not be reaching a definite conclusion, but a possible way to navigate our being in the world through theoretical terms, as well as through contemporary performance practice.

I coined the term 'performance installation' to refer to a performance of non-humans or a theatrical event where human actors do not perform and are therefore absent. What I reconsider here is the relationship between the absence and presence of the human. While the human body is not performing there is a co-presence, or rather a sensual encounter, that is created in the performance of non-humans and the audience and it has to do with traces. To look beyond, what is for the most part considered the dualism of presence and absence, terms such as hauntology, actors, performance and landscape will be more closely looked at and situated within the framework of this article.

¹ The term hauntology is coined by Jacques Derrida in his book *Spectres of Marx* (Derrida 1993) and refers to how the communist ideology continued to haunt Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Throughout the text the reader will encounter short descriptions of the ‘performance installation’ I worked on, *How To Walk On Water*, performed in November 2021. The terms explored through different chapters are not as separated as the paragraphs of text would indicate.

Time: 0-5 min. The audience enters and takes a seat.

The audience gathers around this landscape that slowly transforms throughout the performance. At first, the folded textile on the ground appears as something they can oversee and grasp.



Figure 1 Scene from the performance installation *How To Walk On Water*. First premiered at Schwankhalle, Bremen, 2021. Photo Farzad Golghasemi

2 Hauntology

‘Hauntology’ is a play on the word ontology, the study of being and presence. Hauntology considers the present absences, that which is *not yet* and *no longer*. Relying on Heidegger’s ‘metaphysics of presence’,² Derrida reconsiders the temporal relevance of *being*:

A spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalised presents

2 The concept of metaphysics of presence is related to the history of Western thought and philosophy and encompasses all western metaphysics, which Heidegger looks to overcome. It is an important concept in Derrida’s deconstruction, where presence is seen always in relation to the absence and *différance*.

(past present, actual present: 'now', future present). We are questioning in this instant, we are asking ourselves about this instant that is not docile to time, at least to what we call time. (Derrida 1994, xix)

In line with Derrida's view on deconstruction, any linguistic term gains meaning from its *différent*,³ from the other, rather than according to its positive qualities. 'Present' then 'becomes' always related to that which is not present, whether finding its origins in the past or the future. The future, I consider concerning certain wishes, fantasies, or the impossibility of imagining the future, what is in more recent writings (Fisher, Berardi, Campagna) known as 'lost futures',⁴ referring to the imagined futures that never came to be.

Looking at the disappearance of communist ideology, Derrida's view is not necessarily about a nostalgic reflection on the past but could be seen as the failure to give up the loss. In this return of the things past, a certain attempt "to ontologize remains" (1994, 9) happens. Derrida's view is concerned with 'actual events' with a temporal and ontological disjunction. In some ways, one could suggest that hauntology can give validity to things absent and past. In his view, the formal failure of the communist ideology, with the dismantling of the Soviet Union, can result in Marxist ideas being even more prevalent, as they go on to 'haunt' the societies of the future.

Turning to other than Derrida's possible usage of the term, Mark Fisher, a British writer and philosopher, wrote about hauntology in the age of late capitalism. Avoiding the relation to the supernatural, Fisher points out: "hauntology is rather about the agency of the virtual, that which acts without physically existing" (2014, 18). As capitalism spread on a global scale, so did the media and post-media technologies that came with it. If we see hauntology as the agency of the virtual, it could be understood as the ongoing condition of being in the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As Fisher writes:

In this sense hauntology was by no means something rarefied; it was endemic in the time of techno-tele-discursivity, techno-tele- iconicity, simulacra and synthetic image. (2014, 18)

³ Here used in French *différent* meaning 'different' relates to the term coined by Derrida: *différance*. It is a deliberate misspelling of *différence*, though the two are pronounced identically (*différance* plays on the fact that the French word *différer* means both 'to defer' and 'to differ') referring to the temporal as well as semantic notion of the term.

⁴ In his book *After The Future*, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi refers to slow cancellation of future: "I am not referring to the direction of time. I am thinking, rather, of the psychological perception, which emerged in the cultural situation of progressive modernity, the cultural expectations that were fabricated during the long period of modern civilisation, reaching a peak after the Second World War" (Berardi 2011, 18-19).

In the post-Internet world, once the Internet became a given, hauntology could gain its full effect. The virtual or that which is not physically apparent should as well be considered in a broader context than the one usually implied today (media and post-media technologies, etc.). It can, among many meanings, refer to the forces that govern global capitalism, that are not fully available to our sensory apprehension.

As I introduce more the term and how it is relevant in the socio-political context, I would further turn to how it is reflected within a 'performance installation'. On one side, I propose the relation explored above that I would refer to as the more broad socio-political context and, on the other, the inner workings of the artistic practise in question. The two are connected as any performance form throughout history has always been, in one way or another, a reflection of the moment it was created in.

Within my artistic practise, media such as mechanical elements and software are animating the physical objects, recorded voices can be heard and light is usually considered. These elements attempt to evoke the familiar within the experience of the audience. Like Derrida's 'traces' they are lingering moments from another point in time, creating a pathway to what is experienced in the 'now'.

As technology gains more agency in our daily being in the world, the perspective of the audience in performance could be shifting and evolving as well. In his dissertation on 'theatre without actors', the Portuguese theatre maker, Pedro Manuel writes how the human and technology become entangled and are seen less in their opposition. According to Manuel:

The ontology of disappearance bears the mark of a hauntological relation between the perception of presence and physical disappearance, or between the human body and technological media, which are not seen as separate entities but rather simultaneous occurrences. (2017, 176)

As humans today so often relate to people who are not physically present, as well as to media governed by code (games, VR, different online platforms and social networks), I propose that in performance without humans acting, the audience might find more sensory connection than with the human actor delivering the performance, as usually suggested by the institutional theatre. Thinking of performance without actors as a space to rehearse hauntology would lead to the articulation of the notion of presence and appearing, absence and disappearing as well as traces and spectrality in the context of human and non-human actors such as technology and objects. But who is performing once the human actor is not there?

Time: 2m 56s. Curtain 1 opens followed by curtains 2, 3 and 4

As the curtains of the central space open, they create the notion of intimacy, opening the central space of the installation and revealing the other members of the audience sitting across the room. As the performance goes on, the textile is rolled up from its centre, creating different images and pauses in the ‘virtual walk’. As the voice takes the audience to different places, the set is centralised and slowly moving.



Figure 2 Scene from the performance-installation *How To Walk On Water*. First premiered at Schwankhalle, Bremen, 2021. Photo Farzad Golghasemi

3 Actor

What does the word ‘actor’ mean in non-human performance? What agency is left in the space of a performance, once the human actor is removed? When thinking of the non-human, post-human and object-oriented theories,⁵ I would like to turn to the French philosopher Bruno Latour’s ‘actor-network theory’. Latour writes that an actor exists always in relation to the other actors within a network. Something or someone doesn’t come to act or doesn’t gain agency unless they are connected to the other in the network. Describing these connections Latour writes:

⁵ Many theories that gather under the term ‘New Materialism’ have in common a theoretical and practical ‘turn to matter’, emphasising the discursive nature of ‘matter’, as opposed to, for example, text.

Action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled. (2005, 44)

In these relations, according to Latour, it is not relevant if we talk about human or non-human actors. As opposed to most of the theater scholars today, who see the relation of the human actor and spectator as the only condition of co-presence and a precondition for this ontological notion of performance to be achieved (Lichte,⁶ Brook), looking to hauntology and ‘actor-network-theory’, we can see that there is another way of thinking of agency of the non-human. The prevailing opinion is that the agency only belongs to humans in the performance, whether they are controlling the lights or giving a performance, the props, costumes, software and any other non-living element has no agency whatsoever. The humans animate the otherwise inanimate objects, not the other way around. But, as Rebecca Schneider writes in “New Materialism and Performance”:

The “other way around” perspective is at least in part what the New materialist thinkers are reevaluating, and this “turn” may become less uncommon”, thinking rather about “how things initiate and choreograph behavior. (Schneider 2015, 10)

Hans-Thies Lehmann, in his *Postdramatic Theater*, indicates glimpses of this notion, yet it is still, for the most part, an alternative understanding of what performing non-humans could mean:

What we encounter is an obvious presence but it is of a different kind than the presence of a picture, a sound a piece of architecture. It is objectively – even if not intentionally – a co-presence referring to ourselves. Hence it is no longer clear whether the presence is given to us or whether we, the spectators produce it in the first place. (Lehmann 1999, 142)

Here, we can once again consider the ‘trace’ and the agency that is enacted through the relation of a trace within our experience, and so within the space of performance. If we think of the past as an ongoing occurrence that unfolds through its traces within the present moment, a trace is always embedded in whatever materialisation of what was, is or is to come.

⁶ Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008, 50) states that the event of a theatrical performance cannot take place without a human delivering a performance and argues that a specific autopoietic feedback loop is created through the relation of the actor and the audience.

Theatre director Peter Brook writes in his *The Empty Space* (Brook 1968, 7) that if a human crosses an empty space while another person is watching them, this is what it takes for an act of theatre to appear. But what if no human crosses the empty stage? What if something else happens while someone is watching? What or who is present then? In the space that opens up once the focus from the human actor shifts to something else on stage,⁷ I argue that we find something between presence and absence, between the void of the human actor and what fills that void. Let us start with the possibility of an appearance on the stage. Once the human actor is present, there is a meaning attached to this appearance before the person utters even a word. If we take a step back, if the person never enters the stage, if only a light turns on, what is present then? Heiner Goebbels, the theatre director and composer, mentions how during the rehearsal of one of his productions, once the actor left the stage, the stage designer commented how lovely it looked when he left. As hard as it was for the human actor to hear this, for Goebbels, it opened a new perspective: if there are no actors on stage, the attention of the audience can be distributed across different things (cf. Goebbels 2015, 1).

Through these “different things”, the non-human elements, there is a space that is left for ‘other’ meanings to emerge. The agency that the non-human actor gains in performance is in many ways related to the traces of human experience (the experience of the audience members). What the audience sees in a movement of satin or a rotating chair is always related to their own past experiences with these objects, as well as my own as the creator of the piece. In Derrida’s view of hauntology, something or someone has gone in the form it was but is left lingering and taken on a different or modified meaning according to the different context in time. In this sense, the trace is different from its original (whether the human that was there or the physically present non-human element) as well as differed, or postponed, in that the trace relates to an event that happened at another point in time. “In order to access the present as such there must be an experience of the trace, perhaps something other than Being”.⁸ This “other than Being” can be thought of as a spectre, a spectre of the past appearing in the present, entangled with the present. Whether I think of the meaning that might emerge from the moving satin textile or the rotating chair, I start always with an experience of a trace. In the experiment with the material and its relation to light, sound

⁷ Stage here is used in reference to theatre, but as the ‘performance installation’ is situated between theatre, performance and art installation, it can refer to performance space in general.

⁸ Video interview on YouTube: “Derrida: What Comes Before The Question?” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2bPTs8fspk>).

and movement, I try to translate these traces of my own being in the world, depending on the context of the work. In turn, once exposed to the audience, they take on yet another interpretation and signification and so the act of the performance appears.

Time: 8min 29s

The voice guides the audience toward a park. The textile moves up and down slowly as if it is breathing. It grows, creating a hill greater and greater, blocking the view to other members of the audience, until it is rolled up completely, by which time the audience is (with the movement of the textile, meditative sound and light setting) immersed. The individual is guided by the thread that is pulling the textile.



Figure 3 Scene from the performance installation *How To Walk On Water*. First premiered at Schwankhalle, Bremen, 2021. Photo Farzad Golghasemi

4 Performance

In theatre, the term performance is, as mentioned before, usually considered in terms of a human actor delivering a performance or in performance art, a human artist performing. In media theory, within the umbrella of New Materialism, different scholars write about performance and performativity that relate to performing matter, thereby challenging ontological dualism. Moving away from language as the primary means of meaning-making, matter is seen not only as agential but discursive as well. Karen Barad's view on performativity as the post-humanist process of knowledge production is particularly of interest here. From this post-human perspective, Barad's appropriation of the term 'performativity' has to do with agency seen

as enactment, ‘intra-action’⁹ and entanglement, rather than representation. Barad writes:

It is possible to develop coherent philosophical positions that deny that there are representations on the one hand and ontologically separate entities awaiting representation on the other. A performative understanding, which shifts the focus from linguistic representations to discursive practices, is one such alternative. (2003, 826-7)

In Barad’s agential realism, agency is not attributed and does not belong to any subject or object. It is ‘doing’ / ‘being’ in its intra-activity, in its becoming. As I suggested in the section above, considering who or what has the agency on stage, there is the usual perspective of humans giving agency to the props and costumes, or the other way around, where it can be argued that a costume gives the agency to the actor or scenography to the director. I would propose a third way, where there is a mutual enacting happening in the process, where the human and non-humans intra-act in a way that is by the end of the process indistinguishable in terms of agency, as it is not a given attribute but is created through the relations, as Barad writes.

Thinking of Barad’s ideas within my practice I try to reflect on the process of working on *How To Walk On Water*. The shifting focus between the movement of the materials, light changes, language and sound left the audience members meandering through their thoughts. The starting point of the process was a scene¹⁰ called “How to Take a Walk?”. The text proceeds to guide the reader or the audience through the virtual landscapes of Google Earth images, “collected for all of us to see”. Towards the end of this scene, the audience is guided to the ocean: “What now? How to walk on water?” alluding to the inability to move further within the digital image.

I decided to approach the text with an apparent destination in mind, and many detours on the way. The voice narrating the text would be an amalgam of the person navigating the Internet and the computer-generated personality. The protagonist here is a hybrid between the audience member, the sound guiding them and the scenography entangled in the feedback creating associations and relations.

⁹ Intra-action is a term coined by Barad and “is used to replace ‘interaction’, which necessitates pre-established bodies that then participate in action with each other. Intra-action understands agency as not an inherent property of an individual or human to be exercised, but as a dynamism of forces (Barad 2007, 141) in which all designated ‘things’ are constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing and working inseparably” (<https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/i/intra-action.html>).

¹⁰ From the play by Iva Brdar, *Tomorrow is (for now) always here*. It is about a woman communicating on the Internet asking WikiHow various how-to questions, reflecting on our digital memories and intimacy within our online lives.

Only through the relation of these elements the ‘performance installation’ appears and meaning is created. The meaning is then dependent more on the relation of the performing things, the materiality of those things and the experience of the audience, rather than solely on the language as a signifier. As Barad writes:

Performativity is properly understood as a contestation of the unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve. (Barad 2007, 133)

Barad’s ‘performativity’ I consider on one hand acknowledging matter (as opposed to language) as discursive and therefore performative and on the other, through the entanglement of the elements that are performing. But how are these elements positioned in a space of performance and how do the relations between them emerge? How could the audience navigate this post-human performance? I further move to the notion of landscape as a framework for rehearsing and positioning a performance without humans in a spatial and semantic sense.

Time: 20min 10s. All the sculptures rotate.

The objects or sculptures that are left spinning to the emotional musical number at the end as the lights are more dimmed, resemble islands or artefacts of our analogue lives, as mere deformed fragments.

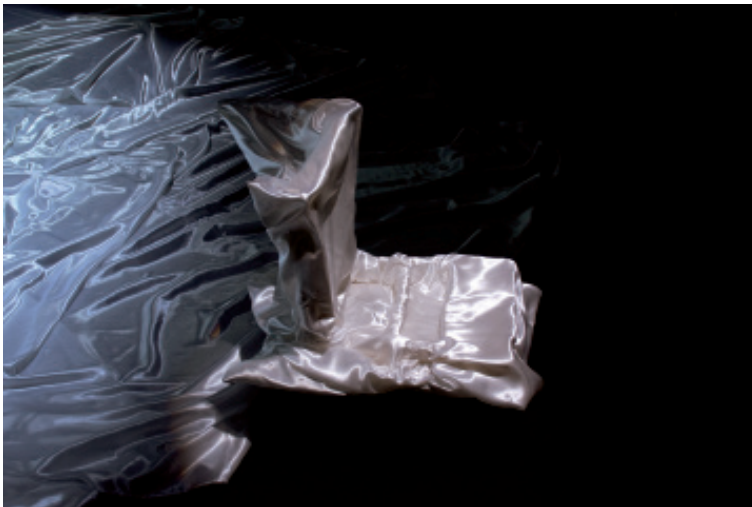


Figure 4 Scene from the performance installation *How To Walk On Water*. First premiered at Schwankhalle, Bremen, 2021. Photo Farzad Golghasemi

5 Landscape

The post-human perspective on performance can be traced back to the post-dramatic ideas of Gertrude Stein and her landscape plays. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Stein wrote and spoke about creating performances based on landscapes rather than linear texts:

I felt that if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance. You may have to make acquaintance with it, but it does not with you, it is there. (Stein [1934] 1985, 122-5)

Landscape plays oppose the usual hierarchy in theatre, removing the central human character, as well as the idea of a linear narrative. Instead, looking at a theatre play as a landscape would mean looking at all elements on stage as elements of a landscape, related to each other. Stein was more focused on text and its materiality. In her long, sometimes barely readable texts, the reader can end up in the liminal space of meaning and non-meaning.

As theatre in the early twentieth century began to manifest a new spatial dimension, both visually and dramaturgical, landscape could for the first time be understood not only as a mere background and setting in theatre. It stood apart as a character and became a figure on its own (Fuchs, Chaudhuri 2002, 3). Later on, it is perhaps even more present in films, where the landscape is truly the main character such as in Tarkovsky's *Solaris* or *Stalker*. In contemporary theatre, we can see clear shifts in the plays such as *Schtifter's Dinge* by Heiner Goebbels, where he works with animated pianos, projections and dry ice, or Romeo Castellucci's *Riot of Spring*, a choreography for bone dust, and Susanne Kennedy's plays where, while still having the actors present on stage, the landscape in both visual and dramaturgical manner is emphasised.

Departing from Derrida's concept of hauntology, I propose that the notion of deconstructing the metaphysics of presence is related to viewing the performance space as a landscape. As Derrida looks beyond the presence-absence dualism, Gertrude Stein rethinks the hierarchical established model of dramaturgy in theatre plays. As Derrida thinks of the end of philosophy, Stein suggests the end of a linear narrative.

If I think, once again, of hauntology as the agency of the virtual, two directions of thought come to mind in the context of this essay. One is the virtual landscape of the techno-mediated society and the other is the virtual landscape of the performance space. What is connecting the two is the presence of something in virtuality even

though it is not there in actuality (Fisher 2014, 19). Could it be that within these techno-mediated conditions, the concept of hauntology and landscape are entangled?

Ana Vujanović, researcher, writer and dramaturg, writes in her text on landscape dramaturgy, Stein's ideas had to do more with textual spacing out of imaginary situations than what we might call 'a natural landscape':

'Landscape', as a concept to describe the new theatre, indicates a 'spacing out' that involves both actual spaces and scenography, as well as the symbolic spaces opened up by discourse. (2018, 3)

Stein's ideas related to other artistic directions of the time, such as cubist painting and avant-garde cinema. They were aligned with the experience and values of the age of industrialisation and the changes effected by it. The artistic movements of the time tended to be quite radical in thought and implementation. In today's late capitalism, Mark Fisher's lost futures' come to mind:

While 20th century experimental culture was seized by a recombinatorial delirium, which made it feel as if newness was infinitely available, the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion. (2013, 8)

The anticipation of what is to come or the lack thereof is reflected in creative processes and artistic works that arise in such a state. In the context of today's media driven, social-networked society, landscape dramaturgy has to do with the notion of perspective. As opposed to the one central point of view (still present since its first use by Brunelleschi in the Renaissance), in a spatial but also semantic sense, landscape dramaturgy is grounded in rethinking the position of human agency on the world. The one central point perspective was seemingly representing the 'realistic' image of the world, keeping the spectator firmly outside of the frame, looking onto it. Today, there is a certain distrust in the present organisation of the world and our position in it. Landscape can be seen as a model for rethinking this position. Here, it is more about the calm, almost melancholic attempt at creating a performance, as Vujanović writes:

Creating a performance as a semantically undetermined landscape of various things in which the only way to situate ourselves is to become one of the components (2019, 9)

It is about meandering through and getting lost in a space of fluid belief systems, searching for something to hold onto without solid ground to stand on.

While thinking of the material I would use in *How To Walk On Water*, I was looking for a material that would capture the experience of 'being online', navigating a space without a clear orientation and perspective, going further and then back, opening tabs in the browser, reading one text halfway, which reminded me of another video or song, forgetting where I am going. Searching for a non-digital medium, I found a textile such as satin, a volatile material that can be at once a large landscape-looking shape and at another point can fold into a cloud. As opposed to the measurable and observable space we inhabit, such as the room we are in, the malleable satin, changes as it moves, folds as the text leads the audience through its crevices, it scrolls on and on and on. We are guided by it, as it disappears in front of us, as many perspectives merge into one point.

Time: 28min 9s. The initial 'landscape' made of satin textile is now completely rolled up and removed from the floor. The curtains close, ending the gaze of the audience and isolating the central sculpture of the laptop alone in the room once again.



Figure 5 Scene from the performance installation *How To Walk On Water*. First premiered at Schwankhalle, Bremen, 2021. Photo Farzad Golghasemi

6 Conclusions

There is a virtual landscape that humans create through their behaviour and relations that extends beyond the Internet. If I think of virtuality as a condition of being in the world in the post-Internet era, this landscape we create, along with other humans and software, does not belong here or there. It has no border or 'actual' (physical) land. Rehearsing this virtuality in a performance without human actors would resemble navigating a haunted landscape. We can think of a performance installation perhaps as a performance of spectres, a haunted landscape as a space where we come to rehearse our human perception of reality, one that is haunted by our spectres and the connections we make with the spectres of others along the way.

Reflecting on the terms explored in this essay, various connections between them are relevant in the creation of this haunted landscape. From the traces and spectres of humans, how they relate to an audience and how they may be translated through non-humans (actors), through an entanglement of different theatrical elements and what is created through their relations for a performance installation to take place (performance), to the relation between hauntology and landscape dramaturgy (landscape).

Landscape as a term escapes measurement and concrete definition, but can at the same time be revealing about our human relations to the world. As a 'frame' to look through, it has often been considered 'a way of seeing' and can as such be a resourceful model for an artistic research in both critical and creative sense. Same can be said for the concept of hauntology.¹¹ As artists, especially within a time-based performance, navigate between facts and fiction, the presence and absence, appearance and disappearance, actuality and in-actuality, we get closer to the very essential question of opposition between "life and non-life". Thinking beyond these oppositions is thinking of "the possibility of the spectre or about the spectre as a possibility" (Derrida 1994, 13).

As landscape and hauntology both tend to be ambiguous, they are as such generative terms that can be related to ongoing meaning making (and breaking). Therefore they are valuable to think of as concepts related to process, that can be further explored through the artistic practise, as the post-human performance can perhaps only be grasped through practice itself. Once the audience gathers together to reflect on what we usually experience alone in our rooms, the ritual of performance might help us navigate the virtual landscape we live in.

11 Hauntology relates to the unknowable and, within scientific research, this could be problematic as the "traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts - nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality" (Derrida 1994, 12). In the context of artistic research, however, the concept of hauntology, I see as an enabling one.

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