

WEAVING OPACITIES

FOR ENTANGLED GESTURES OF GIVING-ON-AND-WITH

„It depends upon Relation that the knowledge in motion of the being of the universe be granted through osmosis, not through violence.“

Édouard Glissant

Navigational Notes:

- I. Following Fannie Sosa's impulse in their chapter „A WHITE INSTITUTION'S GUIDE FOR WELCOMING PEOPLE OF COLOR* AND THEIR AUDIENCES“¹, i² choose to work with a Black background as default for this essay. According to Sosa, *white* as default is not only ideological in representing the starting point for creation and creativity, but also economical as it is proven that Black backgrounds save lots of energy in comparison.³
- II. Choosing the Black background made me think about typefaces as well. So i researched typefaces by Black or BIPOC⁴ creators. The overwhelming majority of designers (in the United States, but i suppose the figures in Europe are not far off) is *white* and male.⁵ This circumstance inspired Tré Seals to create ‚the vocal type‘, launching typefaces as well as offering custom creations.⁶ „Each typeface highlights a piece of history from a specific underrepresented race, ethnicity, or gender“⁷ For this texture try out, i am using the open access typeface by the name of The Neue Black⁸, which was created for Black History Month 2020. The footnotes will be set in another typeface, as they belong to a formal system of scientific work that calls for utmost transparency in a very distinct and rigid shape. Still, as references and links to further insight into the cited and mentioned positions, footnotes are a deeply appreciated part of this texture. Readers are invited to imagine them to be something like sticky notes and scraps of material entangled with the text.
- III. Whatever is readable here, can only ever be sketches, particles within textures which are in constant re-configuration. While these textures go far beyond this try out and defy solo authorship, it is necessary to carefully consider positionalities and therefor the accountability of this writing perspective at hand.
- IV. These decisions are motivated by the themes discussed in the following. The form, shape and texture of this proposal are no less a matter of visibility. This shall be acknowledged in affirming opacities on a formal level, rather than declarative visibility.

Matters of visibility, visibilities of matter

- three scenes and sketches with Manuel Pelmuş and Édouard Glissant

Which are the conditions and modes of visibility in a Western/*white*⁹ context, set out from a Western/*white* perspective? How do these conditions function, who do they serve and how do they affect those who become or are made visible under these conditions, specifically Black¹⁰ people, QBIPOC and ‚non-Western‘ people? Engaging in the search for answers to these questions, in this text i will offer to perceive two perspectives in resonance, which enter this ‚dialogue‘ from quite divergent angles and never actually came in touch with each other. In his essay „Borderlines“ Manuel Pelmuş, a Romanian performance and visual

artist, recounts memories from his personal and professional journey. Those are moments where politics, limits of visibility, economies of presence and agency within representation are in question, especially as part of lived experiences. This text will let these vignettes resonate with the work ‚Poetics of Relation‘ of Martiniquean cultural theorist and poet Édouard Glissant, in which he depicts transparency and opacity as motives of visual, verbal and physical ways of being. Pelmuş‘ experiences can be perceived as exemplary for Glissant’s call for the right to opacity for everybody.¹¹

I. Manuel Pelmuş describes his first traveling experience within the Schengen area, which made him become aware of his body and borders in new ways.¹² Whereas crossing borders „used to be an extremely painful affair“¹³, this time there is no controls, which sparks an entirely different set of sensations. Pelmuş expresses how everything that usually polices his body and mobility didn’t matter anymore in that moment: „My body was no longer evident“.¹⁴ The use of the term evident seems significant here, as its synonyms include clearly ‚visible‘ (i.e. transparent). An evident body is not only clearly visible, but also tangible, meaning it can be approached and grasped visually and physically. Such a body is a vulnerable entity, especially in the context of borders that are governed by power and regimes of visibility to enforce numerous systems of hierarchies, inducing potential violence. Pelmuş recounts this moment in which his body felt no longer evident as one of warm relief, of wellness that conveys possibility and lightness.¹⁵ The body might be no longer evident, but it is still very much sensing and presumably visible, just in a mode that does not expose him to limitations, constraint and pain. Still, the agency of creating this moment, did not lie with him. It rather seems like the powerful sensation of a momentary absence of force and projection. With Édouard Glissant, we can approach Pelmuş‘ depictions as an experience of a glimpse of the freedom of opacity. For one moment, Pelmuş is no longer subject to the projection of what Glissant calls the Western regime of ‘transparency’¹⁶. Western thought, he claims, is governed by the principle of transparency, rejecting everything that is not clearly visible:

If we examine the process of ‚understanding‘ people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is the requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. I have to reduce.¹⁷

Transparency as demanded by Glissant’s critics refers to the idea that understanding something (or someone) is obligatory to communicate with it (them).¹⁸ This implies that understanding precedes communication or interaction on any other level than a distanced

predominantly visual perspective that relies on preliminary ,knowledge' about the Other. This ,knowledge' is already signified by reduction as it is conceived in relation to ,the ideal scale'.¹⁹ Glissant states that, from a Western perspective, transparency is the required basis of the process of ,understanding'. Potential acceptance comes after this process of ,understanding' that involves one sided measuring and ultimately, reduction to the Transparent. Opposing the regime of transparency, Glissant asks:

Why must we evaluate people on the scale of the transparency of ideas proposed by the West? (...) As far as I'm concerned, a person has the right to be opaque. That doesn't stop me from liking that person, it doesn't stop me from working with him, hanging out with him, etc. (...) I can accept what I don't understand.²⁰

Glissant describes how his call for the right to opacity would be opposed with questions such as „How can you communicate with what you don't understand?“. ²¹ While Glissant notes developments in the renderings of difference to a point where it seems as if the right to difference was established²², he still has reservations: „(...) difference itself can still contrive to reduce things to the Transparent.“²³²⁴ The regime of transparency is still at work on several levels. Following Glissant, it seems important to acknowledge, that Manuel Pelmuş describes one particular unusual moment from his experience, where he did not feel as exposed to regimes of transparency. Meanwhile, he, like many, is still affected by them in his overall lived experience. This is to say, Glissant's observation is still vital, even in situations and surroundings like theatre where acceptance of difference and intentions in creating visibility might (seem to) be genuine. This becomes obvious in another experience of Manuel Pelmuş.

II. As part of a group showcase of artists from Eastern Europe, Manuel Pelmuş was invited by a German dance festival in Berlin in 2002. He describes it as follows:

Here the body had to be evident. And everything about the participating artists was meant to be evident. (...) All was clear for the potential audience. Here the ,other' Europe was performing itself, and was invited politely to display otherness (...)²⁵

In this scene, Pelmuş shares a severely different experience concerning bodies and evidence, compared to the exceptional travel before. In this one, being visible is carried out in the frame of a both open and disguised hierarchical setting. The Othered artist's bodies do not have the choice of being less visible in terms of letting their works speak for them. Their very own bodies are made evident.

One can read Glissant in correspondence, who portrays how even potential acceptance is only ever a following step after this process of reduction in the name of transparent visibility. Here, not only does

,understanding' precede communication, but the reduction to full transparency precedes acceptance.²⁶ While Manuel Pelmuş describes how the audience seemed confused after their performances, the journalists simply made sense of what was seen, by explaining the works through the current political situations and other stances ,known' about ,The East".²⁷ While the performances of Pelmuş and his colleagues were rather open to a lot of associations, a standing person balancing with weights was explained through dictatorship and stage lights were declared to be religious crosses.²⁸ These schematic interpretations via the backgrounds of the artists seem to be encouraged by the framing of the artists and their works as analysed by Pelmuş. He implies that the artists themselves, their bodies, were made to function as evidence, as representations of ,The East'. ,The East was an important topic at that moment, and we were the bodies that inhabited it. We were the living evidence that the East was there."²⁹ This is the only path offered to be accepted into the program or by the audience. One could state that the interest or intention here is not communication in the sense of exchange of idiosyncratic lived, embodied experiences in motion and re-configuration, but the desire to ,see' and ,to know'. The confusion of the audience and the forced explanations of the journalists pin point, that this interest was not fully met. They react by projecting their assumptions, thereby imposing and fixing meaning, instead of encountering their own confusion and approaching the works in a more dialogical way. ,The East', namely the different artists and their works didn't make themselves transparent enough. Though they were not the ones who decided on the terms and conditions of their visibility either. This marks the gradual and particular relation between transparency and opacity. In order to delve further into this motive of opacity and its implications, it seems instructive to draw on Édouard Glissant, once more. Glissant calls for the right not only to difference, but to opacity as ,subsistence within an irreducible singularity"³⁰ which one should not confuse with a fixed substance, but note as the acknowledgement of a singular status that can still evolve, transform, be in motion and thus, in relation. Glissant shows how transparency does not equal understanding and demanding for the right to opacity is not a simple act of refusal of communication.³¹ Concerning the experience described by Manuel Pelmuş, we can note that curation, production and reception are crucial matters of care. One must go beyond rendering ,understanding' along the lines of distant observation. If one compares the terms transparent and opaque or evident and obscure, one can observe, that both imply presence and visibility, but their relation to the state of the visible deviate from each other in significant ways. Therefore, we could assume that they also relate to diverse lived and sensory experiences. Another experience of Pelmuş makes this tangible.

III. During another edition of the festival, Manuel Pelmuş witnessed a work by the Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula / Les Studios Kabako³² with the title ‚Triptyque Sans Titre‘³³, which he seems to recall as an outstanding experience. Towards the middle of the show³⁴, a music and dance sequence begins to build up, identified by the audience, him included, as promising ‚traditional African‘³⁵ music and dance, as Pelmuş puts it. For the first time during the show, he senses excitement in the audience, when all of a sudden, the lights are switched off and the whole part takes place in darkness.³⁶

There was an amazing energy coming from the stage, yet no visual representation of the dance. I could sense the frustration ‚[...] we were left only to imagine what the dance must have looked like. We were sharing the same space; the dance was in front of us both present and absent at the same time. What we saw could not be matched with what we expected and imagined.³⁷

This scene and experience is layered. Switching the light off does not lead to full imperceptibility, but rather a significant opaqueness or obscure presence that is sensible, just not seeable. Preset expectations and ‚knowledges‘ are defied or can’t be confirmed. The expected unlimited access is denied, but the audience is not left with nothing. In his unraveling of the processes of ‚understanding‘, Glissant looks at the term ‚to grasp‘ as implying a ‚[...] movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves.³⁸ The piece with its aesthetics, traditional contents and the performing bodies did not allow to be ‚grasped‘. Manuel Pelmuş remarks that ‚Faustin Linyekula managed both to present a traditional dance and, at the same time, to refuse it being transformed into an exotic object for our gaze.³⁹ So opacity could be characterized as a strategy of refusal, but in the same moment, this enactment of opacity could also be read as a claim to agency concerning the terms of visibility, not only of the music and the dances, but of the bodies of the performers: ‚Those ‚African‘ bodies were no longer evident.⁴⁰ Pelmuş goes on to characterize this as:

‚[...] a moment of suspension of a certain kind of ‚prescribed‘ visibility which, in return, opened up space for a different becoming. It created a place of possibility and transformation. A radical cut into what we think is evident.⁴¹

The expected transparent mode of visibility is suspended here. The way Pelmuş describes this viewing experience as opening up and creating space for different becomings, possibilities and potential transformation sounds closer to the sensations sparked when traveling freely and unharmed in the first scene. Again, it is also a physical experience, even though he ‚only‘ senses it as someone else in the space, and in this particular moment it was not his body or a body like his that was ‚prescribed‘ to be visible and evident. Nevertheless, the

sensations are felt and this time, it is the artist's choice to keep these bodies in the realm of opacity while still sharing their presence and movement. Pelmuş connects his experience with certain phenomena of the contemporary conditions of life: „During times where everything must be quantified, profiled, solidified into precise meaning, I thought the piece retained agency.“⁴²

With Glissant, one could emphasize that this agency is generated by a certain degree of opacity and lies specifically with the bodies which usually are measured and exposed. He notes in related ways: „The thought of opacity distracts me from absolute truths whose guardian I might believe myself to be.“⁴³ This distraction could be found in opacities which do not present fixed meaning, knowledge or finalized truths as evidence, but ambivalence and layers that move away from the scale of transparency:

Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components.⁴⁴

Glissant asks for another mode of reception that exceeds strategic distance with depth of field and a ‚grasping‘ gaze or gesture. A mode that does not serve confirming expectation, pre-formed ‚knowledge‘ and truth, severely relying on the clearly visible as prior sensible source of experience. As Pelmuş notices, the suspension of the visual level gives way to other sensations, possibility and transformation. Opacity is henceforth a way of claiming and enacting agency in creating a shared experience that calls for this other mode - a mode of encounter which gives in to ambivalent layers, entangled sensations and not dissecting, not knowing. Glissant suggests „the gesture of giving-on-and-with“⁴⁵ for this favored approach to ‚understanding‘. He goes on to claim, that in this relational mode of ‚giving-on-and-with‘, projection from one to the other as a means to mark boundaries is suspended and this very gesture of encounter could even render the binary of self and other „obsolete in their duality“ altogether.⁴⁶ A subsequent question could be, what would replace the notion of evidence, once all reduction might be displaced? A notion that can account for local and partial insistent presence. Where transparency has ‚grasping‘ as its gesture and evidence as its product, opacity goes with the gesture of giving-on-and-with, weaving fabrics of opacities:

The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.⁴⁷

WEAVING THREADS - EVER OPEN ENDS

What we can draw from both Glissant and Pelmuş is the question of agency and the one of how to engage, perceive or receive? Unlearning to seek for the Transparent and the connected entitlement in looking,

comprehending, framing, curating, programming and organizing seems crucial. Giving space and time to all different kinds of bodies, lived experiences without obstructing or negating their agency. Following the herewith suggested combination of reading Pelmuş as well as Glissant, the task could be to find decentered modes of transparency, which are not used as shields, promoting distinct identity politics, practicing imposition of aesthetics and working conditions, denying structural change and ongoing re-configuration. Instead, they could begin to elaborate, include, practice and embody entangled gestures of giving-on-and-with⁴⁸ in a common ongoing process with every body who is part of institutions or encounters them.

„As far as my identity is concerned, I will take care of it myself.“⁴⁹

„We clamor the right to opacity for everyone.“⁵⁰

Notes:

- 1** Sosa, Fannie: „A WHITE INSTITUTION’S GUIDE FOR WELCOMING PEOPLE OF COLOR* AND THEIR AUDIENCES“, in: *Allianzen. Kritische Praxis an weißen Institutionen.*, (Hg.) Elisa Liepsch, Julian Warner, Matthias Pees, Frankfurt am Main/Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2018, p. 98 - 107, here p.103
- 2** Inspired by artist, curator, DJ and writer Lou Drago, the use of a lowercase ‘i’ is intentional in this writing to reject the way English language privileges the self above others. More of Lou Drago via: https://xenoentitiesnetwork.com/@lou_drago, Abruf am 17.08.2020
- 3** Fannie Sosa, p.103 / related link: <http://blackle.com/about/>, Abruf am 03.11.2020
- 4** this acronym stands for Black Indigenous People Of Color
- 5** see <https://www.vocaltype.co/manifesto>, Abruf am, 17.08.2020
- 6** <https://www.vocaltype.co/story-of>, Abruf am, 17.08.2020
- 7** <https://www.vocaltype.co/manifesto>, Abruf am 17.08.2020
- 8** typeface THE NEUE BLACK from <https://www.vocaltype.co/history-of/the-neue-black>, Abruf am 17.08.2020
- 9** „white“ is written in lower case italics and Times New Roman typeface to mark the construction of this category as one of privilege rather than skin colour, see: „Die BeNennung der AnalyseKategorie weiß schreiben wir klein und kursiv (also weiß), um deutlich zu machen, dass es sich nicht um eine affirmative kollektive Selbstbenennung handelt, sondern um einen Begriff, den wir zur Analysen rassistischen Strukturen und Kategorisierungen verwenden [...]“ in Nduka-Agwu, Adibeli / Antje Kann Hornscheidt: *Der Zusammenhang zwischen Rassismus und Sprache*, in: *Rassismus auf gut Deutsch. Ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk zu rassistischen Sprachhandlungen*, (Hrsg.): Adibeli Nduka-Agwu, Antje Kann Hornscheidt, Frankfurt am Main, Brandes & Apsel Verlag, 2010, p.11-52, here p.32f.
- 10** „Black“ / „Schwarz“: „Die SelbstbeNennung als Schwarze Deutsche ist eine selbstempowernde, strategisch reSignifizierende, machtvolle Handlung und ein Akt positiver Selbstaffirmation (siehe Della und Nduka-Agwu). Deshalb wird der Begriff „Schwarze Deutsche“ sowie die aus politischen, aus SelbstbeNennungen von rassistisch Diskriminierten entstandene Beschreibung und Identität als Schwarz hier jeweils großgeschrieben.“ Nduka-Agwu, Adibeli / Antje Kann Hornscheidt: *Der Zusammenhang zwischen Rassismus und Sprache*, here p.32
- 11** Glissant, Édouard: *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing, University of Michigan Press, 1997, originally published 1990 by Gallimard
- 12** Pelmuş, Manuel: *Borderlines*, in: *Bodies of Evidence. Ethics, Aesthetics, and Politics of Movement*, (Hrsg): Gurur Ertem, Sandra Noeth, Passagen Verlag, Düsseldorf/Wien, 2018, S.53-60, here p.53
- 13** Pelmuş: „Borderlines“, p.53
- 14** *Ibid.*, p.53
- 15** *Ibid.*, p.53
- 16** Glissant: *Poetics of Relation*, p.189
- 17** *Ibid.*, p.190
- 18** *Ibid.*, p.189f.
- 19** *Ibid.*, p.190
- 20** Glissant Édouard in: Loock, Ulrich, „Opacity“, 07.11.2012, <https://www.frieze.com/article/opazität>, Abruf am 30.08.2020
- 21** Glissant: *Poetics of Relation*, p.189

22 Ibid., p.189

23 Ibid., p.198

24 The Transparent with a capital 'T' seems to be marked this way by choice, as a result, a fixed state, evidence of an encounter or directed process. I will follow Glissant in marking 'the Transparent' as fixed outcome of the particular reducing process of 'understanding' from a Western perspective as distinct from gradual transparency which is not detached, but intertwined with opacities

25 Pelmuş: „Borderlines“, p. 53

26 Glissant: *Poetics of Relation*, p.190

27 Pelmuş: „Borderlines“, p.54

28 Ibid., p.53f.

29 Ibid., p.54

30 Glissant: *Poetics of Relation*, p.190

31 Ibid., p.189

32 <http://www.kabako.org>, 29.08.2020

33 Pelmuş: „Borderlines“, p.54

34 find video excerpts and more information here: <http://www.kabako.org>, <https://www.numeridanse.tv/en/dance-videotheque/triptyque-sans-titre>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0qETyc7dLc>, Abruf am 29.08.2020

35 Pelmuş: „Borderlines“, p.54

36 Ibid., p.54

37 Ibid., p.54

38 Glissant: *Poetics of Relation*, p.191f.

39 Pelmuş: „Borderlines“, p.54

40 Ibid., p.54

41 Ibid., p.54f.

42 Ibid., p.56

43 Glissant: *Poetics of Relation*, p.192

44 Ibid., p.190

45 Ibid., p.192

46 Ibid., p.190

47 Ibid., p.191

48 Ibid., p.192

49 Ibid., p.192

