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Pauliina Hulkko  and Riku Laakkonen 

Abstract

This article discusses how vocational actor training could be challenged and developed through materially oriented object theatre to address questions of well-being. Institutional actor training and institutional care are linked by means of artistic research experiments on object theatre. The aim is to extend the scope of actor training beyond the humanistic sphere inherent in acting and theatre by means of providing the pedagogy of acting with alternative notions of agency and materiality. It suggests a conceptualisation of well-being which emphasises its existential, relational and artistic quality.

Keywords: Actor training, well-being, care, materiality, (weak) agency

Introduction

This article discusses vocational actor education and object theatre through the themes of agency, ethics, care, and materiality, and how these relate to well-being. It enquires what actor training could gain from object animation. Taking professional acting education as its point of departure the article expands its scope to include the social and experiential realm of nursing homes and aims to destabilise existing understandings of actor training and well-being. We bring together two distinct institutions and realities: those of the university and of nursing homes. We examine what and how actor training could use materially oriented object animation and how materially oriented object animation carried out in collaboration with elderly persons suffering from memory disorders and living in care units can be beneficial to them.

The discussion takes place in artistic, practice-led research and the pedagogy of acting. Thus, object animation is changed from an artistic medium into a *medium of research* (Kirkkopelto 2015, 49) – instead of being interpreted as a mere artistic practice, a training method, a performance technique, a pastime, a means of communication, a form of rehabilitation, or a medical treatment, which could also be possible.

The article consists of an introduction and three parts. In **Part I**, we position and contextualise the article, outline our critique on actor training, and present the concepts used in the discussion. **Part II** describes and discusses two versions of the artistic experiment Laakkonen has conducted in the nursing home and actor training contexts. This experiment forms the practical basis for the argument of this article. In **Part III**, actor training is brought into discussion with observations arising from the object animation experiments and the given concepts. In this last part of the article, we outline a model which brings together the concepts of object animation, agency, the nonhuman, care, and well-being.

Part I: Context, critique, and key concepts

Context

The article arises from two different practices. Pauliina Hulkko writes from the viewpoint of an actor pedagogue in charge of actor education for the Degree Programme in Theatre Arts (or 'Näty', as it is called in Finland) of Tampere University. She is also an experimental theatre-maker and artistic researcher with a specific interest in dramaturgy, materiality and the performer, whereas Riku Laakkonen's perspective is characterised by extensive experience in puppetry and object animation on the one hand, and applied artistic practices, on the other. In his artistic doctoral research, Laakkonen examines *social death* (Brannelly 2011) and *weak agency* (Kokkonen 2017) by means of object animation. The practical parts of the research take place in nursing homes in collaboration with persons who suffer from memory disorders.

Näty, the actor education that we discuss here, is the only artistic programme at Tampere University. It operates at both BA and MA levels and is closely connected to artistic doctoral education, as shown in this article. The curriculum of Näty combines craft-based training with more academic and theoretical studies and critical pedagogy. Teaching draws from artistic praxis, artistic research, and pedagogical knowledge. Since day one, the student is seen as a co-learner, co-researcher or -thinker, and co-author. The aim is to enhance a 'change in consciousness between three agencies: the teacher, the student and the knowledge they produce together' (Peck 2021, 45).

The training offered in this programme acknowledges the students' physical, cultural and ethnic diversity, as well as their individual needs, paying attention to their collective and individual well-being – as they experience it now and build it for the future. The collective nature of acting and studying is highlighted in the curriculum, since '[t]he actor's art becomes manifest [...] in various environments together with diverse human beings and materials' (Näty Curriculum 2021–24). The curriculum accentuates the actor's responsibility: their artistic, professional, and

societal agency. Instead of a skilled performer, the actor is seen as an author in their own right, a socially conscious artist whose ‘concerns around the effect of a performance are not only aesthetic but increasingly social in character’ (Radosavljevic 2013, 15), someone whom Duška Radosavljevic would call a *theatre-maker*.

The curriculum intends to strengthen the societal significance of the arts. The division into *the technique*, *the dramaturgy* and *the ethics of the actor* (Hulkko 2015; see also Hulkko 2011b) is used to make a distinction between the technical basis of acting (technique), its compositional, intellectual and poetic articulation (dramaturgy), and the ethical considerations and choices inherent in the actor’s art and work at large (ethics). This tripartition also helps the actor to conceptualise and apply their artistic knowledge to contexts outside the arts.

Critique

The actor education described above is not based on any specific artistic legacy or system of acting, unlike many other vocational acting programmes in which technical skills or physical competencies form the basis of training. Näty aims to provide the student with a sound and justified education, and its pedagogical approach could be described as holistic, even progressive, when compared to more traditional training programmes.

We can, however, find several issues which must be critically observed. The first one relates to the actor’s authorship which is strongly advocated in the pedagogy of Näty. The actor’s autonomous role as an *auteur* or ‘exclusive author’ (Camilleri 2019, 21) can be examined and re-evaluated especially by means of materialistic thought.

The second critique concerns the emphasis on the individual actor’s responsibility, and their ability to cope in all kinds of structures and environments – something that Näty as a socially aware acting programme considers essential. If understood differently, the emancipative call for an autonomous and societally conscious artist can also be interpreted as displaying ‘the figure of the entrepreneurial self, individual models of responsibility and autonomy, high achievement and a quantitative, performance-driven culture’ prevail (Buikema and van der Tuin 2013, 2014 quoted in Dionne 2021, 91). The neoliberalisation of higher education, which has also taken place in Finland, is notably worrisome because, as Émilie Dionne points out, ‘it fuels an ontology of precarisation characteristic of advanced capitalism, where the concept of precarity has long left the solace of the economic sphere to account for all new facets of human and non-human life’ (Dionne 2021, 91). Theatre and the actor’s art have been highly affected by precarisation, and we see it as the biggest single threat to the well-being of theatre artists.

Our third and most fundamental critique of actor training concerns its very foundation, i.e., its humanistic basis and reliance on the human figure and experience. We believe this ‘restrained anthropomorphism’ (Kirkkopelto 2004) is deeply embedded in acting and actor training. It has turned into a burden, and should therefore be deconstructed. In this

undertaking, Lisa Peck's definition of *critical pedagogy in acting* serves as an inspiration:

A Critical Acting Pedagogy is built on an ideological framework constructed through ideas of relationality; binary or dualistic constructs are reconceived through adopting a **thinking beside** position; bodies are both inscribed and inscribing, operating with a **vital materialism**; the **positivity of difference** is mined for its potential; **realism is agential**, created through diffraction in relation with human and non-human objects, where changing perspectives are inevitable as we exist in states of becoming (Peck 2021, 204).

Key concepts: well-being, agency, ethics, and care

Well-being

In our discussion of actor training and object animation, we wish to go beyond a limited understanding of well-being as a medically defined, institutionally controlled, and instrumentally exercised feature, connected to quantifiable health and clinical conditions, and as a private matter of an individual, a duty one has to perform and accomplish. These definitions do not recognise the person as an embodied, sensitive being who is also relational and in constant interaction with other beings.

Well-being has been defined from the viewpoint of health or social sciences, as well as in terms of economics and ethics, to mention but a few. We find Katharine Low's (2017) definition broad but apposite as a starting point for the discussion. Low writes that well-being is 'a social construct that intersects with individuals' and communities' perceptions of their own health' (Low 2017, 11). Low sees well-being as a problematic concept because it is often imposed on a population or a group, rather than negotiated with them. Moreover, she wants to highlight the significance of social interconnectedness for the well-being of an individual (*ibid.*).

In addition to Low's definition, we introduce another conceptualisation which emphasises the experiential and spiritual quality of well-being engaging it with the notions and practices of care and performance. This new definition is based on an understanding of the momentous, transgressive potential inherent in artistic experience, and we call it *existential well-being*. Existential well-being resembles *existential health* described by Max Liljefors in his article on aesthetic experience and health. Existential or spiritual health is 'about a subjective sense of meaningfulness, participation in something greater, and self-understanding' (Liljefors 2020, 214), which an artistic experience can also make immanent in a particular way.

Agency

Agency is shared by all kinds of beings and matter, both human and non-human alike. What we want to challenge in relation to actor training is the intrinsic idea of strong agency which in the course of history, has been granted to the actor. We call into question an understanding that is

limited to and dependent on competence, excellence, independence, efficiency, autonomy, and even expression – qualities rooted in acting and productivity. In place of the actor's strong agency, we suggest a different kind, a weaker agency – as outlined by Tuija Kokkonen (2017).

Weak action means an 'ethical, durational and bodily attitude that in its openness is sensitive to potentiality' (Kokkonen 2017, 14). This sensitive attitude requires attentiveness to all things that exist and take place. Kokkonen's ethical attitude, which she calls hospitality, implies that we give time and space to human and non-human others. She defines non-human agency as co-agency writing that '[t]he prerequisite for the perception and manifestation of non-human agency is (human) weak agency' (ibid.). It is essential to give space to others in a way that does not require acting, even if to do so, one must weaken one's own action. This kind of actor is called a *weak agent* (ibid., 52 & 54).

Ethics and care

Ethics is discussed here from three perspectives: first, in relation to acting; second, as a performative and relational care ethics; third, in relation to research, as research ethics. We define the *ethics of the actor* (Hulkko 2015) as encompassing the meanings and functions that ethics has for acting. Following Emmanuel Lévinas (1985: 90), we do not aim at one ethics of acting, but rather, try to find what ethics could mean in terms and in relation to acting. We are interested in the ethical prerequisites and moral implications of acting, as well as what type of ethical questions acting may raise. Besides the Why? of acting, our enquiry poses the questions of What? How? and Where? Ethics is closely linked to the way in which the actor composes their art, to the *dramaturgy of the actor* (Buenaventura 1985; Barba 1997, Barba 2010, Hulkko 2011b, 2016). It concerns the material and immaterial basis of acting, the chosen techniques, working and training methods, exercises, as well as the diverse materiality employed (Hulkko 2015, 81). We argue that each occasion in which the actor acts, or where acting takes place, entails its own ethics, albeit unspoken. This should be taken into account in actor education.

The second definition of ethics sees it as an embodied and performative activity, rather than a scholarly object of study. It emphasises, on the one hand, the interconnectedness of ethics with care, and, on the other, its connection with the non-human. Moreover, in ethics, care is a topical theme in research and current society, not least because in the current neoliberal condition '[p]olitical imperatives about productivity of life in relation to national economics are at odds with the idea of a "caring society"' (Astles 2015, 87).

In care ethics, humans are understood as relational beings. Maurice Hamington writes that '[c]are ethics reframes the fundamental condition of humanity from one of atomistic agents to that of interconnected beings situated in webs of relationships' (Hamington 2020, 22). Care reveals the inevitable interdependency of humans; to care about something is to create a relation. Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto define caring 'as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain,

continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible’ (Fisher & Tronto 1990,40).

Despite their historical dependence on human consciousness and communal life, both ethics and care should be distanced from a purely anthropocentric sphere and be seen in their planetary dimensions (cf. The Care Collective 2020). Silvia Benso (2000) emphasises the importance of touch for a non-human understanding of the ethics of care. She writes that ‘[n]onmediated, pervasive, vulnerable, touch constitutes for mortals the possibility to enter that place of an encounter with things that takes the name of an ethics of things’ (Benso 2000, 163).

In relation to care, our exploration can be read as an attempt at ‘thinking with care’ (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012), and is reminiscent of Luce Irigaray’s concept of *caress*. Irigaray writes: ‘The caress is an invitation to rest, to relax, to perceive, to think and to be in a different way: one which is more quiet, more contemplative, less utilitarian’ (Irigaray 2004, 21). It is this kind of thinking and being we would like to awake, both in writing, as well as in actor training and the theatre.

Research ethics

Apart from the above-mentioned definitions of ethics, there is yet another dimension of ethics which needs to be considered, namely the research ethics applied by Laakkonen to his artistic research. Laakkonen’s research method and its context, the collaboration with vulnerable persons who suffer from memory disorders and live in a nursing home, requires specific ethical sensitivity. Moreover, research ethics must be re-evaluated throughout the research process. Laakkonen’s dissertation forms part of a larger multidisciplinary research project, which had to request an ethical consent from the human sciences ethics committee of the University of Helsinki where the project is administrated.¹ The ethicality of Laakkonen’s research concerns its practical parts. The artistic experiments and workshops begin only after the participant-collaborator and their trustee have both signed the official consent form. The participant is free to withdraw from the research at any point. During the experiment, the elderly receives support from a professional caregiver who is present throughout the meeting.

Part II: Experiments and observations

Experiment with a ball of wool and the plastic part of a lawnmower

Riku carried out experiments in two different contexts. The first one took place with Anneli^[1], an elderly person with memory disorders. The second one was held with Samuel, an acting student. The aim was to understand the changes that take place as the animator and the animated object change while the experiment and instructions are repeated as identically as possible. Both experiments focused on touch. Riku wanted to examine how the tactile sense can be activated by an object and how a person who touches the object describes the sensations evoked by

¹ The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK), appointed by The Ministry of Education and Culture, has made the guidelines for the responsible conduct of research in Finland (TENK 2012), which all academic disciplines must apply.



Photo 1. A nurse, the elderly person Anneli and artist-researcher Riku Laakkonen in the nursing home's day room (Tuesday, Sep. 29, 2020).

touch. This is reminiscent of Benso's 'ethics of things'. The research arrangement was the same in both experiments: the animator sat at a table with their eyes closed.

However, the environments and the research settings of the experiments varied to some extent. Anneli's experiment was conducted in the nursing home's day room, where a nurse was also present, sitting next to Anneli, whereas the experiment with Samuel took place in a theatre studio at Tampere University. Riku and Samuel were the only participants in this experiment.² Next, the two experiments will be described and analysed.

² The experiment with Samuel was not part of Riku's doctoral research, but rather, an interesting byway with which Riku has been able to specify the questions and techniques he elaborates further in his dissertation.

29.9.2020 Experiment at the nursing home

The elderly person, Anneli, sits at the table in the nursing home's day room. Riku, the facilitator of the experiment, asks her to lay her hands, palms open, on the table and close her eyes. Then he places an object on Anneli's palms. Anneli begins to examine the object with her hands. She touches it and turns it around. She says that the object feels light. She guesses that the object could be a ball of wool. Riku asks where the object could be used. Anneli answers that it could be used as a washing line, but first it should be sorted out. Riku asks Anneli to open her eyes and to see if the object is a ball of wool.

Observations

Although Riku did his experiment in a nursing home and with Anneli, the process of memory disorders, or Anneli's diagnosis, was not at the centre of the encounter. Instead, Riku focused on the process of animating the chosen object and in the meeting between Anneli and the object. A 'correct' use of the object was not required, since object animation mostly highlights the ways in which the object could be used and what kind of affordances (Gibson 1986) it offers. Anneli closed her eyes for the experiment so she could not use her visual perception to recognize



Photo 2. Artist-researcher Riku Laakkonen and an actor student Samuel Kujala in the rehearsal space (Monday, Nov. 11, 2020).

the object. This relieved her from the pressure to name the object and use semantic memory.

Anneli immediately started to explore the object with her hands. Quite soon she began to guess how it could be used: one could hang laundry on it or tie something with it. This experiment made Riku recognise the significance of every-day objects and materialities for persons who have been removed from their familiar surroundings and lives. What are the opportunities for an elderly person living in a nursing home to encounter everyday objects which have nothing to do with care – or which this person could take care of? And how could these kinds of encounters reveal, and possibly enhance, an elderly person's agency?

We could observe the elderly person's agency as relational agency, or intra-action, in which all three are essential for the object animation to take place: the animator, the spect-/co-animator, and the object. In addition to shedding light on elderly people's experience of object deprivation, Anneli's reactions during the experiment revealed that hands and touch are invisible, even hidden, in the daily routines of people living in a nursing home. As she touched and described the object, Anneli changed from the one who receives care to the one who cares. This established a new kind of materially sensible weak agency.

16.11.2020 Experiment in the theatre studio

The acting student Samuel Kujala sits at the table in the rehearsal space. Riku tells him to lay his hands, palms open, on the table and close his eyes. He places an object on Samuel's palms. Samuel begins to examine the object with his hands. Riku asks him to describe what he senses. Samuel responds the object feels cool. It reminds him of his childhood; it could be a tiara or a comb. Then he pays attention to the object's shape, putting his fingers between the gaps on its surface. He thinks it must be a part of a bigger whole.

Observations

Riku asked Samuel to close his eyes to turn off his visual perception. The aim was to avoid immediate interpretation and to weaken Samuel's 'everyday agency'. As soon as vision was hindered it was mainly the tactile sense that Samuel applied when getting to know the object. This created intimacy between them.

Samuel 'observed' the object trying to sense all its characteristics, figuring out what it could be. He spoke about these sensations out loud, as if emitting a sort of audio description. At first, Samuel concentrated on the factual, material features of the object, its weight, size, form, temperature, surface, texture. When Riku asked about its purpose Samuel, however, shifted to the symbolic, narrative level and began to describe how the object in his hands could be monster's teeth. Then he started to animate the object and interact with it. This brought along mimesis and representation establishing a fictional narrative – something that often happens when actors start to improvise freely, without being given instructions. Watching the video of Samuel made us ponder how actor training would change if, instead of performing fictional roles, it was concerned with how to perform with objects, e.g., how to 'think with things' (Paszatory 2005) or how to 'perform care' (Stuart Fisher 2020).

The framing of the recording – the medium shot, the viewpoint of the camera, the image that reveals only the upper part of the animator leaving their lower body hidden behind the desk – as well as the set-up of the experiment (the sitting position of the animator, the presence of a table) enhance the human quality and scale of the event, reminding us of the humanistic and anthropocentric foundation of acting in the theatre.

Watching Samuel's hands, however, changes the scale and focus of the event by bringing touch and materiality to the fore. Suddenly, it is Samuel's hands who perform, together with the object. When playing with the object and with one another these hands resemble non-human actors, who possess agency, beyond that of their originator. The experiment raises the question of what actor training could gain from object animation and care in terms of touch and the use of hands.

^[1] Due to research ethics requirements, the identity of this elderly person was anonymised through the use of a pseudonym.

Part III: What could actor training gain from object animation and care?

Materiality, sensitivity, and the nonhuman

Materially oriented object animation opens new perspectives which can be used to expand acting and actor training, as witnessed above. Working with objects, and in therapeutic contexts, could engage contemporary actor training with new kinds of material sensibilities in its quest for the 'transition to the posthuman' (Camilleri 2019, 22).

The primary difference between puppetry and actor training is that unlike the actor whose expression takes place through and at the level of

their own body, the puppeteer ‘locates their centre of expression outside the human body’ (Astles 2010, 22, see also Camilleri 2020, 4). We should consider how actor training would change if it subscribed to the idea that ‘[t]he aim of training [...] is [...] for trainees to develop the skill of drawing attention away from themselves, to a point designated for attention to themselves, as actors have traditionally been told to do. This interest in and direction towards the *other* – other kinds of materiality, sensation, form, etc. – characteristic of object animation is the first benefit that contemporary actor training can gain from engaging with object animation.

Object animation is also inherently material. Besides actual puppets, all kinds of materials are animated in contemporary puppetry: ‘human bodies, raw matter such as clay, sand, water, etc., instant puppets, costumes, scenography, lights, digital and robotic forms’ (Astles 2010, 30.). This kind of object animation, also applied in Laakkonen’s research, could be called ‘extended puppetry’ or ‘material animation’. It bears resemblance to materially oriented performance making or ‘material theatre’ (Hulkko 2022, 345). By material theatre we mean a specific mode of making performances out of materials and objects. This way of performance making is informed by a fascination with ‘the different composition, texture and sensation, and the structure of materials’ (Hulkko 2013, 86). In animation, the animator’s central skill is ‘of suggesting that all things and all matter can be live, can have movement, and can interact with other elements’ (Astles 2010, 30), whereas in material theatre, the performer performs with and in relation to materials and matter which are regarded as performing agents who act with and are equal to human performers. These ‘matter, materials and elements can also be conceived as bodies, body components’ (Hulkko 2011a, 121).

For material theatre to materialise, it is not enough to treat and work with materials and matter as extensions of human agency and consciousness. Instead, to learn how components perform we should be attentive to the performative potential of all components: ‘We must allow materials to perform. They have to be watched and listened [...] And when the time comes, we also have to leave the material alone, let it perform in a way through which its materiality can be fulfilled, materialised.’ (Hulkko 2013, 81.) Performing with objects and beings – e.g., in collaboration with elderly persons with memory disorders – requires specific attentiveness from the performer. This kind of attentiveness, we believe, provides an example of intra-action, defined by Karen Barad as matter that ‘is neither fixed and given nor the mere end result of different processes. Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agential, not a fixed essence or property of things’ (Barad 2007, 137).

While a material approach nullifies the primacy of human body and humane materiality on stage, it also challenges the traditional ways of acting, and its techniques. Material theatre requires new kinds of performing skills. Just like the puppeteer who needs to regularly ‘handle and practice with different kinds of materials [...] with respect for the physical

material of the thing handled or animated' (Astles 2010, 31) also the actor must train how to work materially. They must exercise with a wide range of physical materials, textures and objects (of multiple scales, structures, forms, etc.) and experiment with different senses and tactile qualities on stage. They need to learn how to *sensitise* themselves to a variety of materialities, both in and outside their habitual surroundings.

The actor can exercise material sensibility in many ways, just like (extended) puppetry, where performing is less 'the manipulation of constructed characters but more the expression of a sensibility' (Astles 2010, 25). To increase their sensibility, actors also 'need to develop practices, codes and behaviors which permit them both to contain and express simultaneously, and which develops an understanding of themselves and their animated matter as part of the scenic environment' (ibid., 30). Besides sensibility it is this containment, or the *ability to not express* mentioned by Astles, which is interesting in regard to actor training. The ability to contain, as well as the ability to sensitise, could be understood as a particular technique of performing. It is by means of these kinds of techniques that weak agency can evolve.

For actor training to rearticulate itself in relation to, and in terms of, the non- and posthuman, we concur with Kirkkopelto, who maintains that the problem of theatre is that it is 'limited to the human figure and the limitations of the human figure. It concerns *the human figure as the basis and fundamental principle of limitation, of drawing borderlines.*' (Kirkkopelto 2004, italics in the original.) This problem does not solely concern theatre or acting but is a much wider one, 'a problem of the whole western way of experience' (ibid.). The interdependence between acting and human experience diminishes the affective power of theatre and the actor's art and alienates theatre and theatre-makers from their natural surroundings and planetary condition.

Camilleri locates the problem of humanism in the so-called psychophysical tradition of actor training: 'Psychophysical discourse as it exists and has dominated performer training is still intimately tied to a humanistic and anthropocentric perspective that does not recognize posthuman realities' (Camilleri 2019, 31). We also recognise the problems in the psychophysical discourse of acting and share Camilleri's appeal to include posthuman realities in the actor's art and training. However, the humanistic approach and human experience should not and cannot be abandoned altogether. Both have specific implications, particularly when discussing actor training and the life of elderly persons. Instead, we should distance theatre and acting from the 'restrained "anthropomorphism" which has conventionally given a negative connotation to all "anthropomorphism"' (Kirkkopelto 2004). It is exactly this kind of distancing that actor training has to practice 'time and again through using different means and methods' (ibid.).

Care, existential well-being, and the actor

Care is constitutive to performance. Amanda Stuart Fisher describes the connection between care and performance as follows:

Like live performance that is presented to an audience, the caring encounter is determined both by the repeated, practised gestures, of the caregiver, but also, crucially, by the kinds of responses this elicits in the care receiver. In this sense, caring practice is not simply concerned with caring actions but with how these are experienced by another person. (Stuart Fisher 2020, 7)

Care and acting share a same kind of relationality; acting is a caring action, which is taught, exercised, and researched through actor training. Touch, through which humans connect to the material world, is essential to care and acting. Vision embraces an object at one glance, while touch explores it progressively. As a relational and communicative act ‘touch [...] incorporates the social interface as it dissolves the boundaries between subject and object. Acts of touching, as cultural events, presuppose affective encounters – the relation between “being touched” and “being moved.”’ (Fisher 2007, 167.) The actor who reaches, touches, and is touched by human and nonhuman agents is an *intra-actor*, to use Barad’s notion.

The social quality of touch becomes particularly evident when thinking of vulnerable individuals: infants and persons with reduced agency, such as persons with disabilities or memory disorders (see Field 2003, viii). For those confined to living in an institutional bed for the rest of their lives, touch does not represent only care and relief, but also externalised power which is exercised on them. Among persons with reduced senses and mobility, touch is often the principal and last sense through which they communicate and relate to other persons and their surroundings. During the Covid-19 era, the touch has become particularly problematic and normatively controlled in nursing homes, but also in higher education.

Without underestimating the importance of the medical aspects of well-being we choose to take a different look at it. To us, what is most important about well-being is its shared and artistic qualities. Astles, writing on dementia and puppet theatre, has a similar perspective on health: ‘[H]ealth is a social concern and practice rather than a medical one; furthermore, creativity is one of the key indicators of both individual and community health’ (Astles 2015, 88).

To conclude, we will outline an artistically motivated definition of well-being. It is inspired by the notion of existential health discussed by Liljefors (2020), who recognises a close resemblance between existential health, characterised by inner autonomy and connection, as well as aesthetic experience defined in the aesthetic disciplines (Liljefors 2020, 215). Inner autonomy means ‘the ability to experience meaningfulness even when your external life is much curtailed’ (ibid.), as is often the case for persons with memory disorders living in a nursing home. Liljefors, however, goes on to observe that even in this kind of situation it is possible, by means of an inner autonomy, to ‘find a way to relate to your life’ (ibid.).

Now, what does inner autonomy mean in terms of a performative encounter, be it in actor training or in object theatre? It simply means

that the ones who participate in the encounter are able to both *care* and *be cared* for – as humans, objects, materials. In other words, existential well-being requires that the agent be capable of moving from one agential position to another: from being cared for to one who cares, from an object to a subject, from a human to a nonhuman. It is exactly this exchange and circulation of agencies that the aforementioned object animation experiments displayed. They showed how care and acting are intertwined. What is noteworthy, however, is that to take place, an existentially meaningful encounter requires that the other act like an external agent, a radically material *other*. Finally, what makes this an artistic encounter is that this other is able to change its likeness, form and feel, just as an actor would.

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