



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

TO BE POWERFUL WITHOUT THE MEANS OF POWER: *ACORDO* BY ALICE RIPOLL AND *AZDORA* BY MARKUS ÖHRN

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As you sit there

As you sit there, lost and intrigued, outraged and entertained, everything changes.

The chain of actions of *aCORdo* by choreographer Alice Ripoll leads to a flip that comes unexpected in the final scene. The whole performance is a finely tuned game of power balances and imbalances between spectators and performers until a last reversal, in which the whole situation is turned upside down. The participatory project *Azdora* by Markus Öhrn produces a more gradual and yet equally inevitable turn. Rather than a chain of actions, the spectators perceive a growing flow of force pushing so decisively on power relations that they see them turning into empowerment before their eyes. The relations of power at the core of this work are not those developing between performers and spectators; here the latter are invited as necessary witnesses of an emancipation process turning power 'downside up.'

Invited to write about power and powerlessness, we find ourselves going back to these two works, which stayed with us long after seeing them. Both works inhabit the tension between power as

restriction and power as empowerment; and rather than inviting you in, they settle within you. *aCORdo* by Alice Ripoll (seen at KunstenFestivaldesArts in 2018) choreographs the poles of this tension using authority, as a way to be ‘powerful without the means of power,’ in the words of Luisa Muraro. *Azdora* by Markus Öhrn (seen at Santarcangelo Festival in 2015) operates on ‘the radical transformation of self-representation’ cracking the *patria potestas* and making space for the feminine *potentia*, thinking along the lines proposed by Rosi Braidotti. In this article, we follow their lines of inquiry into these tensions, the glimpse they offer of an overturn from ‘power over’ to ‘power to,’ by putting them into dialogue with feminist thinkers, in order to investigate the ways these performances give substance to and articulate the affirmative side of power.

‘Subjection technologies reveal the negative side of power’—writes Braidotti quoting Foucault—‘but that’s not the whole picture. Power can be also affirmative as “*potentia*,” it doesn’t only produce resistance but also alternative subjectivation models’ (Braidotti 2019, 99, our translation). Both Muraro’s authority and Braidotti’s *potentia* are concepts situated in the positive area of the semantic field of power, the one oriented to the construction of possibilities and relationships: not the oppressive ‘power over’ but the generative ‘power to.’ In *Autorità*, Luisa Muraro explores the emancipatory potential of authority as the experience of

a change in a relationship [that can be felt as] an incitement to act and an increase of our possibilities. [Authority] asks to be acknowledged and practiced for what it promises [...], a symbolic force alternative to what oppresses us [...]. Without being *per se* good or bad, [authority] is oriented in a relational sense, it allows free consent and competes against power for the terrain of political gamble. (Muraro 2013, 49–50, our translation)

The main deed of authority is thus to ‘contribute to turning a disparity into a relationship of exchange and transformation’ (59). The alternative subjectivities emerging in the shift from *potere* to *potentia*, as described by Rosi Braidotti in *Materialismo Radicale*, are also oriented to relationality. They cannot be otherwise as the encounter with others is fundamental for their process of becoming. Here Braidotti is drawing on Deleuze and on Spinoza first, as she describes the *conatus*—the tension to and power of self-preservation that constitutes the essence of the individual in Spinoza—as ‘the subjectivity’s desire to cooperate, to connect, in order to increase the *potentiae* of the singularities and the *potentia* of the collectivity’ (Braidotti 2019, 39). The relational aspect is inherent to such *potentia* described as ‘the capability of enduring and resisting, known as the feminine noun of *potenza*. It is always the feminine *potenza* and never the masculine word *potere* (power). It’s always the subjectivation and never the subjection’ (ibid.).

In this article, we delve into *aCORdo* and into *Azdora*, with the aim of following their lead as they blur power relations and perform affirmative power. The two performances give a very specific body to the concepts of authority and *potentia* as they put forward specific identity markers: the poor man of colour and the industrious housewife. Yet, rather than setting at the centre the bodies themselves, the works complexify the relationship around these identities making use of performativity and theatrical conventions, hence unlocking multiple entry points into these concepts for their audiences and their performers.

A blurring movement

aCORdo, made by Brazilian choreographer Alice Ripoll and her company REC in 2017, suggests in its title a few possible meanings: the Portuguese word 'acordo' means among others 'wake up,' 'agreement' and 'accordance,' while the title can also be read in the way it is written: 'a cor do,' 'the colour of.' Commissioned by the exhibition *Que Legado (Which Legacy)*, the performance is a response to what would remain as a legacy for Rio de Janeiro, after the World Cup and the Olympics, great events that were supposed to bring improvements to a city heavily marked by social and economic inequalities and composed of different neighborhoods, including many *favelas* (slums). In response to this invitation—a response that, as any artistic gesture, does not answer a question but opens it up—*aCORdo* brings on stage the performers with whom Alice Ripoll had already been working for over eight years: young men of colour who live in a *favela* and who experience often the border separating the rich population from the poor, often invisibilized people that do participate in the life of higher classes as workers, but are criminalized and therefore regularly intimidated and often brutalized by police. In this sense, Rio does not look any different than the global society at large. Its life and balances are grounded in heavy demarcations and separations marked by a clear perspective upon the relationships between different kinds of people. The legacy of the events, Alice Ripoll and her performers suggest, risks to just be an enhancement of these distinctions, an intensification of the set of violences that keep separation going and protect the part of society that does not want to be confronted with other subjectivities. This is the historical legacy of a country suffering from capitalist extractivism and a colonization process that has marginalized a part of the population and keeps it marginalized in many ways. This same power structure is mirrored by the theatrical apparatus that *aCORdo* approaches and transforms: historically, the theatre has proposed a gaze based on differentiation and distance, and a sharp separation between an 'us' and a 'them.' It is upon this form and its ideology that Ripoll constructs her performance, and over the performance itself blurs it and finally flips it over, turning the theatre into a device that can make us aware of the positions we are in and the power relations connecting them.

The performance starts with the small group of audience being seated in a room, on simple chairs positioned on two, or sometimes depending on the venue three, sides of the squared space, staring at four bodies—four young men, black or brown skinned—laying on the ground and slowly moving around and over each other. Their movement resembles some contact-improvisation practice but is slowed down into a choreographic score where stillness and just weighting (over the floor, over each other) is as important as touching, supporting, and composing an organic, collective body. The audience is addressed as a collective viewer, and the actions being danced, the movements being moved, take different shades ranging from fatigue to abandon: the movements are slow but restless, the bodies weigh over the floor but never release completely. At some point, one of the performers stands up and starts dancing, followed by the others: one by one, the bodies are mobilized and each of them finds its language in what looks like a dance or a contest, growing in intensity and speed. The costumes become more visible here, as a signifier of

a class or social belonging: workers' clothes that also resemble a uniform—could be a worker's, but also a prisoner's one. The dancers are barefoot, and their movements gradually grow into a very physical choreography, with references to dancing and to fighting, until a moment of surrender comes, and the bodies with their heavy breathing crawl and roll over each other. These movements get the dancers very close to the spectators, who remain a comfortable majority of passive viewers and yet become addressed more directly and more personally by the performance. The spectators sitting on opposite sides also become more aware of each other, since they are now being seen through the moving bodies of the dancers, like a double is seen in a mirror. At some point, the four performers lay on the floor again, this time in line, one next to the other, and one by one each dancer rolls over his companions. Their breathing is the only sound in the silent room, and the small noises made by the spectators become audible too. When the dancers stand again, three of them are carrying the fourth one. He lays abandoned and relaxed over their arms and is carried around as a dead body being taken away from the place of an accident or a murder. The same body is then taken by one of his peers and carefully posed over the body of a spectator or two, given to them as one could give the body of a sleepy child to a parent. The body, still heavy, becomes something to be handled with care, not just by 'his' community but by 'us,' the strangers, the spectators.

In a dramaturgy made of gradual, organic shifts in terms of relation between and among the bodies involved, this is a turning point. The first, and yet not the most radical, switch of positions. With just one gesture, the bodies of the dancers transform from being agents into being acted upon, and the bodies of spectators are suddenly mobilized: their arms are now carrying someone's shoulders or legs, their sitting position is renegotiating its balance to accommodate the weight of another body and prevent it from falling. The scene keeps unfolding, with each of the performers holding the body of a companion and giving it to some audience members, and these same bodies—the ones that carry and bring, the ones that are carried and release—slowly start pulling out some personal belongings of the spectators (a pair of glasses, a scarf, a watch, a necklace, a wallet, a set of keys...), to either put them in their pocket, or bring them to another spectator. These two actions—the carrying and moving of bodies, and the pulling out and redistributing of objects—continue, intertwined with each other, in a calm pace where the dancers oscillate between activity and passivity, being now the moving bodies and now the released bodies, and taking and giving in a circularity that is potentially never ending.

The theatrical conventions play a pivotal role here: nobody in the audience seems to be bothered or worried by something that pertains to the realm of fiction and representation. The theatre is a symbolic space for spectators to soften their behaviors and let some cracks open into conventions and social patterns that would not normally open in the reality of a social gathering. What happens exactly in the moment that we hold an unknown body, that a young strong man is just laying upon us, in complete surrender? What, when the same guy is softly pulling out our necklace or glasses, or opening our bag and taking our wallet or mobile phone? How are we negotiating between resistance and abandon, how do we make the decision to let this happen? What series of assumptions and anticipations does this set in motion? And what does this say about the borders that normally protect us as individuals—our skin, our clothes, our belongings, our beliefs and behaviors?

Here the focus is on how vulnerability and precariousness are constitutive of human, and therefore social and political life. By 'precariousness,' thinkers such as Judith Butler and Isabell Lorey denote the socio-ontological dimension of individual lives as always precarious and co-dependent (see Butler 2004, Puar 2012 and Lorey 2015). Vulnerability, as well as the impossibility of being autonomous that Butler and Athanasiou (2013) also connect to dispossession, are conditions of human life and affect human bodies and relations. As humans, we can only be born when someone else is there with us, and birth is a perfect example of the 'being two' (Irigaray 2001) as constitutive of existence. Individually and collectively, our survival depends on each other: there is no such thing as the autonomous, independent individual.

Indeed, while precaritization is an ongoing process that 'allows us to think about the slow death that happens to targeted or neglected populations over time and space,' precariousness defines 'a function of our social vulnerability and exposure that is always given some political form.' And while precaritization 'is surely a form of power without a subject, which is to say that there is no one center that propels its direction and destruction,' precarity is 'differentially distributed, and so one important dimension of the unequal distribution of conditions required for continued life' (Butler in Puar 2012). *aCORdo* seems to choreograph these terms and to use the theatre as the device that, by assigning positions and defining identities, provides a space to mold subjectivities and to situate and embody discourses. It offers the opportunity to do and undo identities, to exchange positions, to redefine one subjectivity in relation to the others, in multiple and ever-changing ways. Ripoll and the performers are very cautious in not proposing this as a smooth and harmless process though: there is a lot at stake in this possibility that the theatre offers, and those subjects that are more often marginalized are softly but firmly taking the agency that the theatre offers them, while spectators are confronted in their privilege and the responsibilities that come with it. While the positions of performers and spectators never become or pretend to become symmetrical in their power relations, power is in fact molded and transformed and passed on to others, blurring any clear distinction between doing and surrendering, taking and giving.

Vulnerability becomes mutual in this scene: when the bodies of the performers lean on the spectators, they surrender and give their power away, while at the same time taking power over when they start pulling valuable objects from the bodies that are supporting them and keep them or gently pass them over to other hands, other bodies. For a moment, it is not very clear who is leaning on whom, who depends on whom here. As well as it is very unclear what is *actually* going on there, what other shift is going to follow, which action will come next in this chain.

Movement is key here: bodies keep moving, pauses are just marking the separation or the connection between two different postures, relations do not settle in but keep being transformed. Spectators are pushed to experience on their skin how a relationship can only act if acknowledged, and how personal borders can reinforce or vanish according to specific circumstances. *aCORdo* challenges the forms of mutual acknowledgments that are made available to us in the theatre, and how they mirror, but can also switch, the positions that are made available in social and political life. This is where *aCORdo* leads its spectators until just before the final scene, which once again shifts agency and suggests how 'power over' and 'power to' are connected. Different subjectivities,

the performance keeps suggesting, may in any moment switch their positions and role, and move into another configuration, other balances and imbalances.

Before leaving this room

The final flip of *aCORdo* builds upon the state of softened energy earlier produced by the performance, to hit the spectators hard. Keeping the same calm pace that characterized the previous scenes, the four dancers—some spectators' bags on their shoulders, wallets, phones and other objects in their pockets and jewelry around their necks and arms—slowly stand up and move to stand in line next to the door facing the wall, their hands against it, the heads slightly reclined and the gazes towards the floor. They are taking the typical position imposed by the police when checking whether someone is carrying something illegal. A position often meant to intimidate, and sometimes also beat up, individuals that at the eyes of the authorities are seen as either 'dangerous' or not worthy of trust and respect.

Making their bodies available for a police check is the ultimate gesture of the performers, who will not move from this position. Far from ending the performance though, this action calls for a counter-action of the spectators, that can sometimes be immediate and sometimes more mindful. Sooner or later, one by one the audience members stand up and get their belongings back, before passing through the open door and leaving the room. There is no interaction in this final scene, no reaction of the four bodies to the inquiries of stranger hands that search their belongings, often hesitant between the sense of legitimacy given by owning a property, and the sensitivity of an audience that has just experienced how power relations operate, and what place each of us occupies in the world. What does it produce within the spectators to have to search the performers, therefore objectifying them into a representation of the undesirable, possibly criminal inhabitants of the *favelas*? What internal negotiation must be going on within them, between the pragmatic need to get their belongings back before leaving the theatre, and the emotional response to the humanly complex choreography that they have just been part of?

The whole choreography of *aCORdo* speaks of fatigue, search for support, trust, vulnerability, shift in position and mutual responsibilities. The relation that the performance establishes between performers and spectators seems to be based on *authority* and in this last scene becomes a statement about the possibility that the theatre provides to make it circulate among those whom it gathers together.

When writing the short, dense text *Autorità* some years ago, the aim of Italian philosopher Luisa Muraro was to explore and reposition a concept that has long been misunderstood and connotated with negative meanings, probably because of its proximity, which is only literal though, with its abuse, authoritarianism. According to Muraro, who also refers to a wide spectrum of ancient and modern philosophers, authority is first of all 'a relationship among people' (Muraro 2013, 16). Authority is indeed not a prerogative of someone, nor is it assigned by official roles or positions. It only springs from a mutual, often silent agreement: we can acknowledge authority to someone, and can act upon our own authority when this is acknowledged to us by others. In this understanding, authority is a foundation for all human political behavior based upon or heading towards a sense of agency towards one's own life, and responsibility towards one's own position

within a collective entity. Authority, states Muraro, allows us all—those who are granted with authority as well as those granting it—to be ‘powerful without the means of power’ (49). By insisting on relationality, authority opens up possibilities of mutual emancipation and acknowledges the agency of everyone who is involved in a relation, since while ‘power can skip the consent or get it by means of deceit, authority cannot act if the other does not acknowledge it’ (71).

An interesting point about authority, as Muraro writes in the very last pages of her text, is how we can ‘let authority act in situations that indeed seem to require the intervention of power’ (103). In the final scene of *aCORdo*, performers and spectators embody how authority can act even in situations that are normally governed by power, if only the people involved in the relationship acknowledge it and allow it to be. Should we be able to obey authority rather than power, and empower ourselves and the others to act upon our own authority, political relations could be complexified, blurred and blended. In the moment of the final, radical flip of power, the spectators of *aCORdo* are forced to realize that the performers had until that moment acted upon authority indeed, an authority that was granted to them by the theatrical coordinates framing the event. The only affirmative power that we as spectators are offered by the performers, is in the end the power of not exercising our power over them. No matter how long the moment of suspension lasts, before the first spectator approaches the body of the performer who got some of their personal belongings and gets them back by touching and grabbing, that moment is a moment of potential and awareness, a real suspension where we can contemplate the possibility that relations and power dynamics can change.

aCORdo complexifies these patterns of power relations by showing how reality and fiction are entangled, and how a performance can play with the conventions of theatre, also implying that an artistic experience is approached as a form of exception from the coordinates of reality. First the conventions of representation are established, and then they are taken away with a subtle, silent gesture. How did we behave when these conventions were being applied, and how do we behave when the conventions shift and we return to reality? The performance produces a powerful rupture in the pattern of power relations, and then gives the audience the power of maintaining and expanding it, or letting it shut down again and surrender to the known forms of how power operates within and among us. The final scene leaves us the audience in the moment that we get back to our socially-located identity (mostly white, middle class, well educated, liberal...) and have to experience some discomfort in inhabiting it, in being contained by our skin. Skin is indeed explored as a border in *aCORdo*, not just because of the awareness that the work creates about how a darker skin-tone is normally perceived, especially when accompanied by other personal traits such as male gender, young age and working-class outfit. The skin becomes the border because we get touched and we touch: the surface of our bodies, that is also how we are in contact with clothes and accessories that define and express us, becomes the terrain of an intimate and yet tense exchange.

With its final flip, *aCORdo* makes a simple and consequent gesture that becomes somewhat world-changing. The whole performance slowly builds up towards its ending, nevertheless we do not see it coming, and when the power relations shift, they open up to an altogether new constellation of relations. One where authority can fully operate, in its being ‘powerful, without the means of power,’ if only we let it.

Killing the angel in the house ca. 100 years later

Invited to deliver a speech at the National Society for Women's Service in 1931, Virginia Woolf speaks about the Angel in the House, a phantom much harder to kill than a reality, getting in her way during the writing process, hampering her career as a woman writer.

It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her [...] I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. (Woolf 1931, 151)

Azdora and the Angel in the House share much of their identities. Azdora is the traditional housewife of the Romagna region, and although her image and qualities belong to a past epoch, the word is still used in the everyday language of the region. A quick search on Google will result in thousands of images featuring home-made tortellini, piles of dirty dishes to wash and the *azdore* themselves: smiling middle-aged women with an apron and a rolling pin. The website 'The Myths of Romagna' offers the following description of the *azdora*: 'Ruddy-faced and a little dirty with flower, with her hair collected in a headscarf or a hat, she is the positive symbol of a tireless industriousness and the cornerstone of the traditional family' (Miti di Romagna, n.d.).

The *azdora* tends to fulfill the etymology of her name, becoming the bearing column of the household—a powerful and yet subordinate subject—the Angel in the House devoted to the care of others and of others' feelings at the price of her own.

In his site-specific project *Azdora*, realised for Santarcangelo Festival in 2015, Markus Öhrn works on the consequences of this care labour and on the chances of transformation of the contemporary Angels in the House from the Romagna region. Interested in this figure, Öhrn involved 28 women from Santarcangelo who, gathered through an open call, committed to the artist's long-term project investigating the destructive and undomesticated side of the *azdora* and the possibility of emancipation.

Part of the starting point is biographical: Markus Öhrn recalls how his grandmother's biggest remorse was that of having always put others in front of herself. In an interview, he says: 'I was born in northern Sweden, in a patriarchal society, where the values of the nuclear family are the only "existing" and accepted ones. I never felt at home in such an environment and I witnessed the consequences that this system has on people with a different lifestyle.' The consequences for women exceed the biographical and enter the structural: if men and children are allowed to be angry, destructive or childish, insofar as these behaviours are accepted as part of their 'nature' or

personalities, women are often encouraged during their education to avoid anger and refrain from making trouble as it is considered unfitting.

In 'The Promise of Happiness,' Sara Ahmed proposes to look at 'gendered scripts as "happiness scripts"' (Ahmed 2010, 59): happiness, or more specifically its promise, orients women's desires and behaviors, binding their happiness to that of others and towards 'happy objects' that are presumed to be good and promising of happiness such as marriage and motherhood. Sara Ahmed reports Arlie Russell Hochschild's example of the bride who, even in the case of a gap between the expected feeling of happiness and a different actual feeling, has to 'save the day by feeling right' and 'prompts herself to be happy' with the given situation (41). Within the workings of this narrative, there is no room for expressions of anger or behaviors that would disturb the making of a happy home. Not by chance, it's the figure of the happy housewife—and not that of the happy woman—whose genealogy is reconstructed by Sara Ahmed in order to investigate the emergence of the unhappy housewife and the 'feminist killjoy,' two figures whose negativity challenges, in Ahmed's opinion, 'the assumption that happiness follows relative proximity to a social ideal' (53).

Azdora gives shape to an artistic attempt performed by housewives from Santarcangelo of emancipating themselves from the promise of happiness. The project was born out of their encounter with Markus Öhrn, Jakob Öhrman and the musician ? Alos (Stefania Pedretti). It occupies a space for the whole duration of the festival and opens its doors to the audience once a day for 10 days, in the evening, for a transformative black-metal ritual. Spazio Saigi—*Club Azdora*—is a former warehouse, which was used mainly for the storage of wheat. It's a sultry shed with no windows, whose obscurity is interrupted only by a glimmer of light coming from the heavy black curtain hanging at the entrance door. Coming from outside, the presence of *Azdora* is marked by the audience gathering before the start of the daily ritual. Once inside, as the eyes get used to the dark, it is possible to see a merchandising corner, where fans and t-shirts featuring the writing 'azdora' printed on them in gothic characters are on sale. The rest of the space is only dimly visible and in the absence of a stage or any sitting option, the audience is left wandering around. The space might resemble a squat, there are some writings on the walls—the list of rituals that compose the project—as well as some video documentation featuring the azdore.

On the first evening, 'RITUAL #1 A New Beginning,' they wear the make-up we would get used to seeing them in everyday, with their faces painted in white, big black circles around their eyes and black lipstick. They wear their own clothes. Some wear slippers, some have plastic hairpins in their hair. They all seem to be rather indifferent to the audience's presence, immersed as they are in their own club. Then, in the second room, equally dark, hot and damp, a washing machine appears, stage-lit and ready for action. Brooms and mop sticks are leaning on it. One azdora plays a bell with a stick, announcing the start of the ritual. Another one, sitting on a throne, starts urging the others to action through a microphone with a hoarse voice. She says: '*Dai, dai, dai...*' (the equivalent in English is the colloquial 'come on'). The soundscape absorbs these sounds in an atmosphere of anticipation. In the smoke, one of them hits the washing machine, her posture and body express power and determination. Others join in, one at the time, hitting the appliance with a broom or a mop stick. As the hitting stops and the chorus of '*Dai, dai, dai*' becomes more and more decisive,

the washing machine starts spinning its drum and making small jumps, some parts are shot out of its door and its top falls apart piece by piece. In an increasing rhythm, the machine self-destructs and the lights go off.

Azdora was shaped during a long residency period, documented through some videos made available inside Spazio Saigi. They feature the *azdore* involved in exercises like destroying cars with baseball bats in a junkyard or as they walk through the city or on the beach pulling off small childish stunts. Also during the festival days, it was possible to come across an *azdora* armed with a water pistol, who might or might not spray you. *Azdora* is in fact multiple things at the same time: a concentration of performative images, a process of transformation, a participatory art project, a black metal fantasy, an ongoing emancipation workshop, a social and artistic ritual. Following its lead means thus thinking through its multilayeredness and its processuality.¹

In the second and the third ritual, the *azdore* open up their club to a closer encounter with the audience. In 'RITUAL #2 The Confession,' people are offered a one-on-one meeting with one *azdora*, with whom they could exchange memories, stories and secrets connected to an important *azdora* of their life. In 'RITUAL #3 Eternal Commitment,' a commission of *azdore* listens to 10 people from the audience as they, one at the time, describe why they want the name of one *azdora* tattooed on them. They then decide on the one person, who will actually be tattooed in the course of the ritual. The audience, gathered around the commission, witnesses the interviews and then the tattooing, which is also video-projected on the wall. This ritual punctuates the entire trajectory of *Azdora*, as it is repeated also on the seventh and tenth day.

'Every revolution'—writes Braidotti—'includes the culture of and the radical transformation of self-representation' (Braidotti 2019, 105). This was very clear to Virginia Woolf, quoted also by Braidotti, whose battle with the Angel in the House is made harder by the fact that she is a representation: 'Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had dispatched her' (Woolf 1931, 151). Virginia Woolf describes the violent struggle entailed in such radical transformation that is no different than killing a part one's self. Even if the killing is successful, no one will give back a woman the time and the labour she invested in this form of emancipatory self-destruction: 'Though I flatter myself that I killed her in the end, the struggle was severe; it took much time that had better have been spent upon learning Greek grammar; or in roaming the world in search of adventures' (ibid).

The *azdore* seem to be killing a fictional figure by means of fiction. Their presence and practices are dark and shining at the same time. In their clothes and attitudes, they combine the artistic imaginary of Markus Öhrn, with their own imaginaries, desires, and everyday objects. Folkloristic head-scarfs fall into place within a black-metal aesthetic and body-building and tattoo culture meet and mingle with matriarchal figures. They are *azdore* unbuilding the fictional figure of the *azdora* by embodiment and transformation. As they embody it as real *azdore*, they also engage with her destructive side through their real bodies and stories. They operate radically on their (self-

representation and construct new fictions for themselves and for others. At their Club, the audience is completely immersed in the space. The *azdore* embody their *potentia*, they make their 'power to' palpable and as this power reverberates through the music, the humidity and the obscurity, the public's bodies can only be set as witnesses. The atmosphere is charged with energy and yet rich in funny and entertaining ingredients. It tunes in to eerie and ironic elements, it blends the ceremonial and the farcical. As a witness, one smiles and at the same time is made very aware of the seriousness of the process they see: a 180° turn of self-representation injected with irony, fear and excitement.

In 'Nomadic Ethics,' Braidotti describes the radical transformation of a subjectivity as occurring also on the level of representation and identity models: 'a radical process of de-familiarisation or dis-identification from dominant representational and even self-representational practices' (Braidotti 2013, 348).

Azdora is an outburst of joyful passions. In it, the transformation of subjectivity is made suddenly palpable as the curious idea that it might as well just begin with a joyful destruction of the self. In the *patria potestas* (the father's power and property), the feminine *potentia* took the stage. Continuing with a paraphrase of Braidotti's words, in *Azdora*, killing the Angel in the House did not claim to cancel the consequences of the unbalanced distribution of reproductive and emotional labour; it tried to transcend the resignation and powerlessness that follows the struggle of killing a subjectifying self-representation, and the time invested in it. In the celebratory destruction of the self performed by the *azdore*, the struggle was still present but, in this case, the time for roaming in search of adventures was not lost forever, rather it appeared as it had just begun.

The making of

The transformation of self-representation brought about in *Azdora* intensifies gradually in the second half of the festival, when the rituals become more disturbing and compelling.

'RITUAL #6 The Path of Pain and Understanding' presents some elements that will come back in other rituals and are particularly charged with meaning. Like all the other rituals, this one appears in a density of noise music, obscurity and smoke. Also the throne, another recurring element of the rituals, is there. An *azdora* sits on it dominating the floor, where a circuit has been prepared. The audience standing around witnesses two naked men covering the circuit on all fours. Three *azdore* mark three points on the path, a fourth one completes it sitting on the throne. Every time a man reaches a point he gets hit by the *azdora*. She spans him with no hesitation or mercy, armed with different instruments, some more or less ascribable to the sadomasochistic imaginary, some coming with a hard impact, some with a softer one. It doesn't take long to realize that the two men are Markus Öhrn and his artistic collaborator Jakob Öhrman. As they pass the *azdora* on the throne, she asks: 'do you understand?'—her voice emerges in the thick noise music. The two men masturbate and set off for another round on the path of pain and understanding. The exchange of roles is clear as the male artist submits to the women participating in his artistic project, and through the sadomasochistic metaphor, gives up his power and control becoming the slave of his mistresses.

'RITUAL #8 The Gathering' was closed to the public. It was a party only for *azdore*. Only those who partook in the project as well as others—friends of theirs who also are *azdore*—were invited. A black metal noise concert was performed for them, they put on costumes and the usual make up on each other and had their friends over in the club. Markus Öhrn and Jakob Öhrman, this time in latex bodysuits, walked on their hands and knees to serve the *azdore*, who took once again the mistresses' role. In a video interview given on the day after, Markus Öhrn, Stefania Pedretti and Jakob Öhrman describe the trajectory undertaken by the *azdore*: 'Yesterday we could see what we have created, that is the real thing. Yes, there are performances that you can go and see every night. That's something but the real thing is what happens between them now. It's its own organism, we don't control it anymore.' They tell about the *azdore* becoming familiar with black metal noise music and starting to build a relationship to it—'Stereotypically you wouldn't think that an old woman would start liking metal or noise but they do.' Also the face painting is recalled as an important element, which was questioned at the beginning but towards the end of the festival became a tool to transform: 'they put it on and they become something else. It's like opening Pandora's box, then they can do what they want...' (Santarcangelo Festival 2015).

The single rituals are set in a trajectory that pushes the energy higher and higher, as the *azdore* move from more familiar and innocent actions—such as destroying a washing machine—to more ruthless actions and practices that one would assume to be distant from them—such as whipping a sexual slave before a live audience. The three tattooing rituals frame this *crescendo*, which is traceable at the aesthetic level in the make-up and clothing of the *azdore* that gradually develop to find their final shape in a figure whose appearance recalls an evil folkloristic creature and whose presence is unsettling and mesmerizing.

Already by the day of 'RITUAL #6,' the radical transformation seems not only to have begun but also to be in full becoming. Witnessing any of the rituals, one would find oneself before a subject in becoming—quoting Rosi Braidotti—made concrete by performance. Following the entire trajectory would bring to the surface the gradual development of such becoming: a subject being made, and being made by herself in a radical interconnection with others. In this case, other *azdore* and the public. By the evening of 'RITUAL #10 Eternal Commitment. Rebirth and Final Liberation,' marking the end of this part of *Azdora*, each of them became a woman who had killed the *azdore* in herself, and got rid of that naturalised identity snooping around her own businesses, and was now a creative subject on a stage. This process was definitely singular and, at the same time, it didn't resemble a solitary emancipatory effort as the one described by Virginia Woolf. Rather, it was made available on stage as a radically collective affair. The celebratory destruction of the self gave way to celebrating rebirth as a subject in becoming with others. Drawing on Spinoza, Braidotti describes how negative affects 'harm the capabilities of a subject to establish relationships with others and thus to grow together.' The emancipation of the *azdore* appears as a process of liberation from those negative affects, an unlocking of joyful passions able to nurture 'high levels of interdependence—the dependence on otherness—which is also the key to understanding the subject as "non-unitary"' (Braidotti 2019, 136).

The rituals produce a conflicting set of affects, made of wonder, distance, curiosity, respect, discomfort and fun: the making of a group of women making individual women, and individual women making a group of women. In this sense, what the audience witnesses is not the making of another subjectivity but the subjects in the making, through a collective practice. It is because this process is made so concrete and so accessible through performance, that the question 'what now?' becomes pivotal—the making of new subjects in the making is now concretely beyond theatrical representation.

What happens after a participatory art project has been a point of discussion and critique in many instances—a fundamental reference in this sense is Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (2012)—because of the paradoxes of participation that such projects carry with them. The above-mentioned interview ends with the following:

After Sunday they will be again at home cooking for their husbands, so we have a responsibility to continue this somehow, to let them use this energy further [...] The goal would be that it would be their own organisation. I mean, there is a quite big problematic thing of course...it's about the mother but once more again, maybe one can say that it was initiated by me, I am a man and once again the man is telling the woman how you can be free...I would like for it to become their own group. I just want to look upon myself as a starter, together with these two, and then that it would, you know, live its own life, so it doesn't become Markus Öhrn's project in the end.

The project remained Markus Öhrn's but *Azdora* did undertake its own path. The artists accompanied the azdore as the whole group returned to Santarcangelo festival in 2016 for black metal noise concert and the release of the LP 'Dai,' and also toured in Italy (Xing, Bologna) and in Germany (Wiesbaden Biennale, in 2016 and Kampnagel in Hamburg in 2018). In 2017, without the artists who initiated the project but without abandoning the aesthetic developed with them, the azdore opened a bed and breakfast for artists during the festival; and in 2019 they performed a ritual—Azdora's Temple: greetings to Eva Britt Niemi—to remember and honor Markus Öhrn's grandmother. In August 2019, soon after the final iteration in Santarcangelo, the whole project came to an end with a ritual in Niskanpää, the village where Eva Britt Niemi was born and spent all her life. The azdore were in residency there and performed a series of actions, including a final ritual on her grave.

Rosi Braidotti describes the subject in becoming as a subject 'freed from being One, [who] starts functioning as a junction for many diverse intersections and encounters with a multiple otherness' (Braidotti 2019). In her perspective, the ethics corresponding to these subjectivities unfold in the radical relationality that belongs to power as *potenza*. In her Spinozian view, we look for the encounters with others, and multiple others, which increase our agency, the capability of our bodies to act, our productive power. The multiple otherness as Braidotti conceives it, didn't belong to *Azdora*, whose group was homogeneous in terms of identity. Yet, on that stage and off it, it was possible to see 'an embodied subjectivity,' who could truly be—and probably was—in a process of transformation embedded in a radical interdependency with others: a group of bodies desiring the

encounters with others, and becoming together with others as they represent, embody and perform a flip: from power over to power to.

The traces of *Azdora* are very alive in its participants and in its witnesses as the desire to continue working together shows. What certainly remained to the women, next to all this, is the women themselves as witnesses of each other's making and of the process of making themselves as a group.

Aftermath

aCORdo and *Azdora* set in motion forms of spectatorship, identities and relationalities, shuffling the constellations of power at the theatre. In these two shows, a relational space is set up by someone specific, a body carrying an identity marker, for somebody—a more or less varied group of people gathered there as spectators of something about to happen—who will exit affected by the relationships that appeared and unfolded in these encounters.

In *aCORdo*, the performers create and use this relational space by gently but radically operating a series of shifts of position and finally, inviting the audience to walk through the very same door they had entered at the beginning, and get back into the world—the 'real' world—shaken, questioned, or even transformed, awakened, supported, sparkled. In *Azdora*, the spectators are invited to an already existing space of relations whose processes they can attend to almost only as an echochamber, and are left with the awareness of being witnesses of a transformation that, while not being about them, affects them deeply.

Here, spectatorship is put to work by two very marked kinds of bodies, that of people of colour coming from a poor and violent background, and that of the women as housewives. To their audiences, they come with a proposal of radical relationality, moving apart from the theatrical audience situation. At the beginning, both *aCORdo* and *Azdora* operate a clear distinction between the performers and the audience. A dichotomy is stated either by marking a separation between their roles and the place they are assigned to, or by emphasizing the differences between bodies that at a first sight are read on the basis of the identity politics marking them, and bodies that, mingled within the temporary collectivity of an audience, do not appear in all their individual complexities.

Yet, as the actions unfold, both pieces hinge on the identities they put forward, making complex the relationships around them rather than the bodies attached to them, and do so by also involving the other bodies convened by the theatrical setup: those of the audience. In *aCORdo*, the relationships shaping the theatrical convention, in which the public is more directly called into question, are maneuvered in order to let performers and audience soften their fixed identities and roles by experiencing each other's vulnerability, and acknowledging their interdependency as much as the asymmetries entailed in it. In *Azdora*, the relationships that helped shape the fixed identity of the housewife gradually make room for the relationships that unbuild it: the spectators reverberate and recognise themselves in both, bitterly acknowledging the first in their own

identities, families, constellations, and cheering and cherishing the second as they witness the rituals of transformation.

Ultimately, both performances flip around a set of relationships between fixed identities and open them up to often unnoticed ways of performing power and authority, thus setting conditions for the experience of an affirmative *potentia*. The strategies put in place are different, somewhat opposite. In the case of *aCORdo*, the capability to act—the *potentia*—is triggered by the performers and then left to the audience. Still, for the spectators, not acting or at least suspending the moment of acting feels like the most responsible option, when the position they are given is, not differently than in everyday society, a position of oppressing and acting upon structural violence, that the theatrical device reveals its most subtle nuance of innocence. In *Azdora*, the *potentia* fills the atmosphere as the power to roam in search of new adventures and to get rid of one identity in order to embrace the subject's tendency to be in becoming. The emancipation that comes with it is for the *azdore* though. The audience can be deeply touched and inspired, but they are also reminded of their position as necessary witnesses to a ritual meant for those who perform it.

The encounters taking place in the frame of these performances make visible the deep lines binding and separating bodies, identities and subjectivities as they let emerge transformative processes of becoming. Here, is where they intertwine, embedding these transformation processes in a radical relationality. *aCORdo* builds on authority in order to complexify power relations and sections a field of tensions drawn taut by opposed identities—black and white, poor and rich, actors and spectators—with the notion of a subject that is always dependent on and constituted by others. *Azdora* puts on stage a nomadic subject in the making, to be witnessed in her constitution through a process of creative destruction that is operated by herself and by others. A woman 'desiring metamorphic processes of the self, of the society, and of her representation models' (Braidotti 2019, 130).

Intertwining spectatorship, identity and relationality into a composite, *aCORdo* and *Azdora* unbuild fixed identities to show their relational constitution, every performance anew. They entertain the idea that power might be replaced with authority as suggested by Muraro, and that identity could be overcome making room for subjectivity as proposed by Braidotti, also by means of performance.

Notes

¹ Here the complete list of rituals: 'RITUAL #1 New Beginning' followed 'RITUAL #2 The Confession,' 'RITUAL #3 Eternal Commitment,' 'RITUAL #4 Enlightenment through Darkness, noise and chaos,' 'RITUAL #5 Transcendental Demolition,' 'RITUAL #6 The Path of Pain and Understanding,' 'RITUAL #7 The Eternal Commitment,' 'RITUAL #8 The Gathering,' 'RITUAL #9 Aftermath,' 'RITUAL #10 Eternal Commitment. Rebirth and Final Liberation.'

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