Emancipated spectatorship and subjective drift: understanding the work of the spectator in Erik Ehn’s *Soulographie*

**Introduction**

In *The Emancipated Spectator* Jacques Rancière gestures towards a ‘third way’ of conceptualizing spectatorship without fully elaborating the form that it might take. Emancipation is largely defined against what it is not: it is not theatre that seeks to transform spectators into active participants, it is not ‘hyper theatre,’ it is not the return of the total artwork. What kind of theatre, then, might realize Rancière’s vision of ‘a community of emancipated narrators and translators’ who might ‘change something of the world we live in’? This article asks how the ‘emancipated spectator’ might be understood in more fully theatrical terms than those Rancière outlines and, furthermore, how such a figure – and the relationships that constitute him or her – might be read ethically. To respond to Rancière’s somewhat elusive ‘third way’ I wish to consider *Soulographie*, a cycle of seventeen plays by American playwright Erik Ehn, each concerned with genocide, which were staged at LaMaMa theatre in New York in 2012. The title, *Soulographie*, is drawn from a poem by Jacques Prevert, “Song in the Blood.” The word ‘soulographie’ is taken from the French text, which is rendered in Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s English translation at ‘drunkographie.’ Ehn writes: ‘Soulographie is about our drunkeness and our sobriety as it relates to the perpetration and response to genocide; also: the geography of the soul’ (83). The week-long season, which culminated in a ‘marathon’ in which all plays were shown back to back over two days, drew together a broad network of theatre-makers, including professionals and students, with participation from artists
from Spain, Poland and Uganda as well as from all over the US. The subject of genocide was explored within a range of settings, from Africa – Uganda and Rwanda – to Latin America, to the US. Each of the works offered a different perspective on genocidal violence. Whilst some plays, drawing on historical material, made the testifying voice central, others looked at the subtle violences within families, drawing a line between domestic violence and genocidal thinking. These connections suggested that genocide is not something that happens ‘over there’ or ‘far away’ but rather the obscene endpoint of a logic of violence that begins here and now. The movements of genocide were traced out within and between the plays in what Ehn called, ‘shadow patterns.’ At a final talkback at the project’s conclusion, he provocatively asked, ‘how does your daily life require the oppression of others?’ Rather than focusing on individual play texts I wish to consider both the occasion of their staging and the common thematisation of morality and ethics that runs throughout the broad body of work. I have chosen *Souolographie* as an example through which to consider the emancipated spectator both for its ethos, themes and dramaturgy, but also because it stands in useful contrast to the emancipatory ‘credentials’ more commonly assigned to participatory, immersive, postdramatic or applied theatre. I suggest that we need be sceptical of the emancipatory claims of ‘hyper-theatre’ and weigh them against the less tangible work that takes place in silence, stillness and darkness. How might alternative economies of spectatorship be constructed not so much through a physical reconfiguration of the theatrical space or an emphasis on postdramatic precepts, but a psychological and spiritual shift or ‘drift’ as discussed by Ehn? In the preface to the published volume of plays, Ehn describes drifted subjectivity as where ‘I,’ ‘you,’ and ‘we’ ‘nicely confused’ and makes this a central element of ‘effective speech for trauma.’ I wish to read what
Ehn describes as drifted subjectivity as a ‘third way’ of thinking about the work of the spectator and to posit this as a practice of non-violence whose ethics derive a particular kind of contemplative work.

**Emancipation and contemporary theatrical praxis**

Before discussing *Soulographie* I wish to outline in more detail how Rancière’s emancipated spectator is located within contemporary theatrical discourse. Underlying Rancière’s argument is the desire to recuperate spectatorship – the process of watching and listening – from the modern and postmodern critiques that have assailed it where the conventional modernist arrangement of audience and theatrical action is understood to reflect a series of hegemonic binaries. That is, the nature of the relationship between theatrical action and theatrical audience has been taken as symptomatic of, and in some ways a metaphor for, socio-political pathologies of inequality. This of course needs to be seen in light of Rancière’s formulation of the ‘distribution of the sensible,’ which he describes as ‘the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts.’ For Rancière, it is this ‘in common’ aspect of the system of the sensible – consensus – that generates a politics of ‘what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak.’ Thus, what is at stake in the notion of the emancipated spectator is the ability to harness an aesthetics of ‘dissensus’ in order to ‘break’ apart the privilege of the power of the visible speaker. The opposition of spectator and action,
her argues, ‘specifically define[s] a distribution of the sensible, an a pirori distribution of the positions and capacities and incapacities attached to these positions. They are embodied allegories of inequality.’ By asking us to recognize the status of the spectator as equal in capacity to the ‘actor’, Rancière contests any notion of spectatorship as defined by lack. His argument enacts a kind of rhetorical peripeteia towards a hoped for anagnorisis: ‘the empowerment of the capacity of no matter who.’

As Rancière points out, the problem of how to activate the spectator has been of much concern to theatrical theorization and experimentation specifically concerned with theatre’s political and ethical social role. He suggests, for example, that at a philosophical level both Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, despite their radically different approaches to theatre, began with the desire to reform the opposition of spectator and action:

They intend to teach their spectators ways of ceasing to be spectators and becoming agents of a collective practice. According to the Brechtian paradigm, theatrical mediation makes them conscious of the social situation that gives rise to it and desirous of acting in order to transform it. According to Artaud’s logic, it makes them abandon their position as spectators: rather than being placed in front of a spectacle, they are surrounded by the performance, drawn into the circle of action that restores their collective energy. In both cases, theatre is presented as a mediation striving for its own abolition.
Similar critiques recur in analyses of contemporary theatrical practice that locate theatre’s ethical aspect in relation to its ability to make spectators social actors – the work of Augusto Boal, for example, which seeks to overturn oppression by creating scenarios in which ‘the spectator starts acting again.’ In a different aesthetic context, but with some philosophical concord, Erika Fischer-Lichte draws upon Marina Abramovich’s *Lips of St Thomas* as an exemplar of theatre’s ‘transformative power’ inasmuch as the work requires the intervention of spectators for its own completion – it is a disturbing call to action that measures the ethical conscience of audience members. The material conditions of this prescription for transformation are significant. They require the physical exertion of audience members (above and beyond energy normally expended in a darkened auditorium) and a rearrangement of modernist theatrical architecture, which Dorita Hannah has described as marked by inherent disciplinarity, violence and conformity. As a strategy for ‘re-enchantment,’ as Fischer-Lichte puts it, such conditions are underlined by a suspicion of illusion, instead privileging, as the Abramovich example makes clear, the pain of the real. In an Artaudian sense, this pain shocks spectators out of anesthetized complacency. In other versions of what Ranciere calls ‘soft ethics,’ or what Bourriaud describes as ‘relational aesthetics,’ the focus of performance practice turns explicitly to the meeting of spectators and actors, to ‘joint presence.’

But what others ways of reading theatre’s ethical or emancipatory potential have been established apart from a paradigm dependent on an inversion of reversal of the usual role of the spectator? Hans-Thies Lehmann suggests an ‘ethics of responsibility’ for the audience that stems from an apolitical theatrical stance that resists ‘theses and messages’ in favour of ‘the withdrawal of representation’ (an iteration of a politics of unrepresentability) so that spectators are drawn to reflect
upon their own presence as spectators, an activity which is implicitly framed as moral or ethical.

The performance addresses itself fundamentally to my involvement: my personal responsibility to realize the mental synthesis of the event; my attention having to remain open to what does not become an object of my understanding; my sense of participation is what is happening around me; my awareness of the problematic act of spectating itself.²⁰

In the schema of Lehmann and others, the political (and ethical) aspect of postdramatic theatre lies in how it is made, and in its relational aspects when produced, rather than by explicitly political content. Affect is harnessed: ‘forces, intensities, present affects’ dominate in place of meaning (11). Postdramatic theatre is understood (or exhorted) to discard character, plot and themes for its sees these (drawing on Rancière) as politically stultifying. Politics is implicit and indirect – it is expressed structurally, through form, rather than necessarily through content. The political force of postdramatic theatre has been conceived – at least in its theorization by Lehmann and others following him – as precisely deriving from the ways in which it takes issue with a thematic and content-based approach to political meaning’ (16-17). Ehn’s own writing has some concord with this in the sense that he writes: ‘social change is not the content of performance, it is its medium’ (81). In the case of Soulographie, the community inaugurated by the event, and the process undertaken by this community modeled an anti-genocidal ethic.

With some similarity to Lehmann’s ‘ethics of responsibility’, Helena Grehan has argued that the ethical aspect of spectatorship lies in its ambivalent aspect:
Ambivalence [...] is a form of radical unsettlement, an experience of disruption and interruption in which the anodyne is challenged. Ambivalence keeps spectators engaged with the other, with the work, and with responsibility and therefore in an ethical process, long after they have left the performance space.21

Nicholas Ridout also echoes a similar sentiment when he imagines how a model of ethical theatre based on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas might be realized:

The work that would provoke a truly ethical response, in Levinas’ terms, would be that work which appeared, at least, to have no ethical ambition whatsoever. Such a work would have to confront its spectators or participants with something radically other, something that could not be assimilated by their understanding of the ethical.22

Certainly ambivalence unsettles a politics that relies on the reversal of social relations as proposed by Augusto Boal, for example. Tony Fisher, in response to Boal, proposes an alterative political model for theatre that, as with ambivalence, complicates a simple binary inversion of the powers of spectator and actor. Fischer suggests that it is through the ‘destabilization of relational space’ that theatre’s democratic potential might be realized: ‘Radical democratic theatre cannot ‘liberate’ anyone but it can destabilize the matrices of a given political distribution.’23 Such destabilization is multi-facted, being aesthetic, physical and psychological as well as socio-political.
We can therefore see that there are two chief lines theatrical praxis and analysis that respond to contemporary political and ethical demands through addressing the role of the spectator. One seeks to activate the spectator through engaging them in shared activity with the performers – that is, they are assigned explicit action apart from the role of sitting in a darkened auditorium. The other seeks to harness the power of the contemplation that takes place in the formal arrangement of stage and auditorium to direct spectators’ attention back towards their own role as spectators; to engender self-reflexivity. Each has its own points of concord and dissonance with Ranciere. While Ranciere argues for the valuation of the role of spectators as active interpretators (not to be understood as passive), many of the relational theatrical practices that discard the distanced interpretive role of the spectator are themselves grounded in the kinds of relational redistribution of power as described by Fisher above. Conversely, although ambivalence and self-reflexivity understand the power of the spectator as active interpreter, there remains an abject affect to conceptualisations of this position that stand in contrast to the wished-for activation of ‘the capacity of anonymous people, the capacity that makes everyone equal to everyone else.’

In the following section I will therefore very briefly expand upon this critique of these two positions in relation to ‘emancipation,’ before finally returning to *Soulographie*.

*Defending spaces of contemplation, remembering the limits of self-critique*

Firstly, one of the questions underlining this essay concerns the degree to which a theatre of dissensus and emancipation need necessarily dismantle a traditional proscenium arrangement. In response to Ehn’s own interest in practices of
contemplation and silence I am interested in interrogating the political and ethical potential of theatrical listening. As outlined, because theorization of theatre understands its very structures as politically problematic, re-arrangement of the physical structures of theatre is often employed. Immersive theatre, for example, is easily read as resisting the structures of domination inherent in modern theatre (as aforementioned critiques have argued) insofar as such structures, as Tony Fisher remarks, ‘supress the desire of the spectator to transgress the boundary which separates the world of the play from the [real] world.’ But, does the dismantlement of the proscenium and freedom of movement of the audience mean that spectators form a more democratic or emancipated relationship to the performance? Not if we think of the proscenium in ideological as well as material terms. On that basis it may be regarded as mobile, providing a set of values that determine the performance event regardless of distinctions drawn between immersive spectatorship on the one hand and a conventionally arranged auditorium on the other where the former is understood as the more ‘emancipated’ of the two. In Immersive Theatres, Josephine Machon, for example, quotes from Rancière to argue that his vision of emancipation is one where spectators ‘become active participants rather than passive voyeurs.’ Drawing upon Rancière in this way she misrepresents the context of the quotation, however, which is drawn in fact from the beginning of his refutation of such a position – and which his ‘third way’ is stood in contrast to. Indeed, at the end of the chapter entitled, “The Emancipated Spectator,” Rancière clearly rejects what he calls ‘hyper-theatre that wants to transform representation into presence and passivity into activity.’ The point here is not to quibble with Machon and her excellent extensive analysis of immersive theatre, but rather to illustrate the manner in which what we might call hyper-spectatorship is defined largely in physical/affective and
geographical/architectural terms, which are then taken to have broader political and ethical significance. I argue that, paradoxically, the emancipation of spectators in these kinds of context can in fact reveal a subtle violence underlying the scenic arrangement. Such violence is a consequence of what Rancière calls the paradox of the spectator: the spectacle is dependent on their presence, and yet their participation is characterized by ignorance.\textsuperscript{28} The effect of the pre-supposition that spectatorship is enhanced through immersion, through abandoning the dark space of contemplation and reflection is that a perverse kind of spectatorial violence arises in response to \textit{fear of ignorance}. This article is therefore invested in defending and exploring the contemplative practice that emerges from the position of listening and watching when its is the object of knowledge that is emancipated, rather than the physical relation of spectator and actor.

Secondly, need the political necessary abandon theses and messages? Is the attention given to the structures and processes of theatre, including reflection upon what it means to be a spectator, ethically and politically sufficient. Taking a cue from Judith Butler, I argue that an ethics of spectatorship founded on the moral value of self-reflexivity relies too heavily upon an underlying assumption of self-critique that might arise within the relational context established by any given performance. In \textit{Giving an Account of Oneself} Judith Butler argues that the limitations of one’s ability to give an account of oneself are systemic and irreparable: ‘The “I” is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence.’\textsuperscript{29} Similarly, a spectator, as interpellator of an account given by another, cannot disentangle her or himself from the ‘social conditions’ of the ‘emergence’ of their response to the performance. Butler further writes: ‘It is precisely by virtue of one’s relations to others that one is opaque to oneself, and if those relations to others are the venue for
one’s ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that is it precisely by virtue of the subject’s opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds.’\textsuperscript{30} Thus I return to the term ‘abject’ to caution against locating ethics in relationships defined by a fundamentally estranging alterity. Need ethical response be dependent, as Butler points out with reference to Nietzsche, on ‘bad conscience’: ‘Accountability follows only upon an accusation […] And we become reflective upon ourselves, accordingly, through fear and terror.’\textsuperscript{31} Is this what emancipation looks (or feels) like? How might we think otherwise about the formulation of emancipation?

\textbf{Soulographie and ‘the art of the unrepresentable’}

If we acknowledge the two limitations described above, then what form might emancipated spectatorship take. It is first important to return to Rancière’s own views on ethics and aesthetics. While I am seeking to draw some connection between emancipation and ethics, it must be noted that Rancière himself is deeply sceptical of what he calls ‘the ethical turn’ in art, describing it, at its worst, as ‘endless work of mourning’ that suppresses the dissensus required for a healthy democracy.\textsuperscript{32} For him, the discourse of contemporary ethics emerges from, and is practiced in service of, the normalization of political violence – from a rhetoric of ‘infinite justice.’\textsuperscript{33} The argument is similar in character to that of Adorno as discussed by Judith Butler in \textit{Giving an Account of Oneself}, when she writes: ‘collective ethos instrumentalizes violence to maintain the appearance of its collectivity.’\textsuperscript{34} Embedded in Rancière’s critique is a resistance to claims for unrepresentability, which he argues underpins much ethical discourse: ‘The unrepresentable, which is the central category of the ethical turn in aesthetic reflection, is also a category that produces an indistinction
between right and fact, occupying the same place in aesthetic reflection that terror does on the political plane.35 Rancière carefully points out that there is a difference between understanding contemporary practices of ‘art of the unrepresentable’ and a certain moral concern with representability. By the latter scheme, unrepresentability does not mean that representation is not possible, but rather that only certain kinds of representation are desirable or appropriate. That is, in the case of the Holocaust, one should speak of it, one should make art works about it, but one should not attempt to mimaetically restage it, or to draw the audience into some kind of identificatory paradigm where they are lead to feel that they understand the experience of the concentration camp subject. In contrast with this, Rancière identifies a different kind of art of the unrepresentable:

It is not the unrepresentable that stands in contrast to the old logic of representation. Instead it is the elimination of a boundary that restricts the available choice of representable subjects and ways of representing them. An anti-representative art is not an art that no longer represents. It is an art whose choice of representable subjects and means of representation is no longer limited (197).

In the same way that Ranciere write against the notion of ‘unrepresentability,’ Ehn makes clear the danger of submitting to unknowability:

Genocidal crimes are constructed to be unspeakable and they are maintained that way, defended from accountability to the fabric of reality and historical
memory. The ambient method of production stands against this strategic inaccessibility by approaching from all sides at once.\textsuperscript{36}

Therefore, for him, contemplation is a permanent action, as he remarks of his own ‘permanent contemplation of genocide’ (5). He further writes,

> When we accept events to be inconceivable or inexplicable and leave it at that, we buy into a political lie and submit our heads to a truncheon of usefulness. There are productive and apt ways to forward knowledge and experience through damaged speech and mauled expression (6).

Thus the strategy of the plays is to submit language to a process where it resists usefulness whilst at the same striving to allow the ‘Disaster’ to infiltrate oneself: ‘Enjoy the poetics of fear. By the same poetry, the same drift, allow Disaster to move into you’ (7).

We can now turn back to the notion of the emancipated spectator and seek to marry it more clearly with Rancière’s conception of dissensus and the role that art has to play in articulating and manifesting such a politics. Clearly, an emancipated spectator is one who has achieved a distance from the sensible. Such distance both enables observation and is achieved through processes of watching and listening. What is important to Rancière is the fundamental equality of spectators and actors, which is to say that emancipation is not the preserve of those who appear to act – who are visible in acting precisely because of their distribution within the fabric of the sensible – but is more powerfully located as a universal potential: ‘the capacity of anybody.’\textsuperscript{37}
It is in *Soulographie’s* approach to the ‘unrepresentable’ that we can begin to understand its emancipatory work, specifically through Ehn’s concept of drifted subjectivity, which acknowledges the interdependence of subject and spectator. *Soulographie* was very much interested in a dialectic of limit and excess, both in the sense of the limits of the ability of individuals to know themselves, as Butler discusses, and our ability to understand or comprehend a subject such as genocide, which is but its nature, excessive. I wish to argue that Ehn’s cycle of plays presents a productive example of an aesthetics of dissensus that is deeply ethically engaged. The political field as seen in Ehn’s plays in this cycle I will argue demonstrates a politics of dissensus in its ethos and aesthetic at the same time as it takes as its subject the violence that undergirds the consensus-based politics that organizes the distribution of the sensible. Rancière writes that: ‘Artistic practices are ‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility’ (13). I suggest that Ehn’s plays are especially strenuous in their intervention, and, in this way, gain strength from the ways in which they manifest ‘a distance of the sensible from itself’ (10 theses in Dissensus). The question is not so much ‘How do they engage spectators?’ Or, ‘How do spectators participate?’ But rather to do with the ways in which the audience achieves the kind of political distance that Rancière describes, but unlike alienation or the affect of postdramatic theatre, this distancing movement takes place between audience, actors and text. That is, the audience is not distanced from the performance, but distanced with the performance. As Ehn remarks of a ‘theatre of witness’: ‘We are flawed with characters; otherwise we are colonial to their experience.’38 The ethical vision expressed through the plays’ explorations of genocide (and its relationship to the US)
is one that does not rely on consensus and the violence that Rancière and others argues flows from this, but rather is a responsive praxis of invention – of making and world-making in the face of that which defies individual understanding. Ehn’s work is very much of interest to me precisely because of its formal linguistic innovation as a response to genocide and the limits of our ability to ‘know it’, which might be described as postdramatic in certain aspects, but at the same time as its commitment to what I will describe as social legibility. The political is both structural and embedded in the content of the plays, which move between highly poetic and extremely direct political registers. This article is not a polemic against postdramatic theatre, or other contemporary practices such as immersive theatre, but rather a further interrogation of some of the ethical claims that have been made in service of them.

**Soulographie: the drifted spectator and an ethics of contemplation**

*Soulographie* was the fulfilment of almost twenty years of writing, for Ehn, Professor of Playwriting at Brown, who described the project in terms of ‘how history happened to me.’ Watching the plays performed back-to-back within the two-day cycle the centrality of subjectivity was clearly evident. Individually and collectively the works bring together multiple and overlapping subjectivities in relation to violence: testimony, reportage, personal experience, artistic response and vicarious imagination. 39

This was a particularly singular investigation of genocide and its relationship to US history, however. Indeed, Ehn has described the plays as making his personal
experience public property. Reflecting on the analogous processes of writing the plays and preparing theme for presentation, Ehn remarked:

Along the same lines [as the methodology of the writing], the method of construction (widespread, collaborative) advertises an ethic of community, in redress to genocide’s attempt to forbid history – to forbid the making of meaning by barring our real and imaginative abilities to gather history.

Elsewhere he commented: ‘The method of production modelled the manifesto against genocide. Where genocide is designed to break a people (break community) we worked to bind attention and presence in good will and wakeful contemplation’ (84). The distinctive approaches of each of the companies to performing the plays demonstrated the ability of Ehn’s texts to act precisely as a ‘third thing’ capable of inviting emancipatory engagement. Watching the marathon of plays, one after another, the effect, for me, was of differentiated (between the actors and myself) yet shared contemplation of the subject of genocide.

In reflecting upon Soulographie I foremost want to discuss the event as a form of listening and contemplation and to enjoin this to the work of the spectator as discussed by Rancière, when he describes his or her role – in proposing an emancipated community – as that of ‘active interpreters’ who might ‘develop their own translation in order to appropriate the ‘story’ and make it their own story.’ As noted, Rancière writes against what he calls ‘hyper-theatre,’ which transforms the spectator into an active participant, favouring what he calls a ‘new scene of equality,’ based upon a mutual dialectic of knowing and unknowing, shared by actor and spectator, or teacher and student, alike. The two dominant forms of art and theatre-
making that Rancière contrasts with this third way are: ‘the total artwork,’ which he
describes as the work of ‘a few outsize artistic egos or a form of consumerist hyper-
activism’; and ‘hybridization’, where there is a constant exchange of ‘roles and
identities.’ He criticises both for leading to ‘stultification’ through ‘blurring of
boundaries and the confusion of roles to enhance the effect of the performance
without questioning its principles.’\textsuperscript{45} Drifted subjectivity differs from such blurring
in its defence of contemplative space. In it, while the actions of speaking and
listening preserve their distinctiveness, responsibility is shared. Personhood is fragile
and never taken for granted. Ehn writes:

\begin{quote}
We lack compassion and understanding because we lack compassion for and
understanding of wounded language. We do not know and we cannot do
because we don’t have faith in the capacity of words – even in their weakness,
especially in their weakness – to make space for events, to make a theatre for
events, to admit of the drama of events. We sometimes don’t seem to believe
that theatre, which is broken space, can admit of life in all its complexity; we
don’t believe in complexity, we hate weakness and are anxious to know it
would make us weak – and that in our weakness we will be theatres, and that
on our stage we will be responsible for the actions obliged to a compassionate
drifted person.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

Significantly it is textuality as opposed to staging effects (or affects) that incites drift.
The language of wound, drift, break and weakness is here recuperated as a set of
terms for responsibility. This is distinct from ambivalence or an alienating alterity
where the performing human figure resists identification, becoming, as Nicholas
Ridout puts it, ‘utterly strange’ to the audience. Ehn invites audience members to drift with the actors, who themselves are drifted to the worlds they have researched and now perform.

In discussing *Soulographie* it is worth finally placing the concept of drifted subjectivity, and particularly how it might be related to ethics, there are two critical contexts to bear in mind. The first concerns the manner in which the drift described contests conventional identity politics. Matthew Causey and Fintan Walsh have argued that: ‘If we accept that the creation of multiple identities is at least one of the central aims of capitalism, then it follows that any ethical response to that world order in its present condition must involve renegotiating the relationship between identity and politics.’ *Soulographie* certainly contests the negative identity politics the underpin genocide (vilification and destruction of the excluded other), but it also explores in more complex ways the manner in which identity formation figures within the constitution of ethical relationships and communities. Ehn himself writes: ‘The self is now an organized set of fragments […] So rather than being people, per se, we are what we piece together from what was ourselves and what was someone else’s’ (9). The second, and following, is to do with the manner in which Judith Butler argues that ethics relies upon ‘risking ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness.’ This unknowingness is only evident when we address ourselves to another, when we are ‘dispossessed ‘ of our account of ourselves. In reflecting upon *Soulographie*, as well as discussing the formulation of inter-subjective exchanges within the plays, I wish to consider the ethical position of the spectator as the recipient of address.

Ehn subjects dramatic language itself to an emancipatory process, unburdening from conventional dramaturgical dialectics: protagonist/antagonist,
rising and falling action, comedy/tragedy and so on. Further, *Soulographie* was particularly concerned with the negative space of unknowing as a fundamentally ethically one and in this regard is an especially interesting example against which to discuss Rancière’s vision of emancipation. Ehn’s writing attempts to bring the ‘unknowable’ into representation but to let its ‘too big-ness’ inform or infect the text.

*Soulographie* is designed like a planet – it’s taking on giant themes, so wants to be shaped so you can’t see all of it at once; the horizon bends away from you. The too-big structure is meant to suggest the unspeakability of genocide; the organic quality, and the labor that informs it all, are meant to provide a central gravity that affirms a commitment to be with unspeakable – to live out a life and imagine policies across it, despite the overwhelming scale.⁵⁰

The effect is a foregrounding of the contemplative process akin to Rancière’s description of emancipation in the situation of schoolmaster and student:

In the logic of emancipation, between the ignorant schoolmaster and the emancipated novice, there is always a third thing – a book or some other piece of writing – alien to both and to which they can refer to verify in common what the pupil has seen, what she says about it and she thinks of it. The same applies to performance. It is not the transmission of the artist’s knowledge or inspiration to the spectator. It is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identification of cause and effect.⁵¹
Ehn’s texts, unique in their particularly open character, provide a ‘third thing’ that en joins both actors and spectators in a contemplative process. In his discussion of *Soulographie* (and other work), Ehn returns again and again to the notion of contemplation, which we can understand as a very specific type of listening akin to what Alice Rayner calls ‘listening at the boundaries of comprehension.’ Such listening is willing to attend to silence and that understands silence, as Ehn puts it, as a ‘perfect gesture of inclusion.’ Continuing, he writes:

> We need an ethic that weds good and evil, that does not purge evil from the discourse, a language and ethics that fear and move forward, that oscillate, that are in between … and that remain effective, active. When we resign from our responsibility to know the Disaster, we step back from creation by the same measure’ (8).

Ehn’s own resistance to ‘authorizing’ his texts is apparent both in his arrangement of subject and language and in details such as stage directions, which are not instructions as much as invitations to inclusion.

> Three martyrs broken on the wheels of the slot machine fall into alignment. Their chests are open and their hearts are cherries. 10,000 nickels pour out of the machine – rats eat them before Jack can get back to them. JACK and his wife CLAIR wander outside, drunk. They stop at the same time, although they remain in separate worlds.

From, *Everyman Jack of You*
Many boys and girls wait out the storm, sitting on the floor.

Across a golden floor, a silverware army.

Elsewhere a person with a strong, heavy head.

Forks compete over an empty plate.

Many children, waiting.

From, *Dogsbody* 

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The dead wait in a graveyard, crouched as if sitting in small chairs.

From *Forgiveness*

Rather than reading such instructions as poetic evocation, I suggest that these directions are a way of engaging both actors and spectators in a process of grappling with the ‘too-big’ and its impossibility. They are a refusal of impossibility, which is to say, in this context, a refusal of genocide’s ‘unspeakability.’

In this way of language of the plays cultivates spaces of attentiveness requiring of both actors and audience members a kind of vigilance, indeed asking them to participate in a form of vigil. When I spoke to Ehn he remarked that people sometimes comment that they let the difficult language of his plays ‘wash over them,’ but that this is not what he wants. Rather he asks audience members to listen to that which is precisely at ‘the boundaries of comprehension’: language that is constantly turning a corner, or disappearing over the crest of a hill. To attend to such writing audience members must both bring themselves to the scene and at the same time be willing to lose themselves – to allow what cannot be shown or understood to affect perception – to give it a dwelling space. ‘In the case of *Souleographie*, the plays desire meaning without getting there; plays and audiences are meant to be present in the
middle of meaning-making. The present tense is that way collaborative in a time of stress (compassionate).’ (93)

Ehn further writes:

If we are going to make art for that which is only understood contemplatively, and if the center point of contemplation is silence and perfect permission, then we must render in ways that excel direct perception. *Soulographie* is a way to get lost in that which surpasses us; exceeds our grasps, because it grips us.\(^58\)

On the back jacket of the published texts of *Soulographie*, Marc Robinson describes this as ‘slow hearing’, remarking: The spectator who practices it model an attentiveness that itself protests a culture of indifference.’\(^59\) Such attentiveness is key to Rancière’s recuperation of spectatorship: ‘viewing is also an action […] the spectator also acts, like the pupil or the scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, on others kinds of place.’\(^60\) *Soulographie* asked its audience to attend to violence, to genocide, despite and in defiance of its excesses. Such work is understood by Ehn as ethical activity and as constituting an ethical community.

In the preface to the published collection of plays Ehn discusses the ethical work of both audience and actors in terms what he calls, as described earlier, drifted subjectivity where ‘I,’ ‘you,’ and ‘we’ ‘nicely confused.’\(^61\) Where Emmanuel Levinas focused his ethics on fealty to the other where that other, in their alterity, remain fundamentally unknowable, here subjectivity much more slippery. This is reflected in the texts of the plays themselves, where characters are mutable, changing from one thing to another, perspectives constantly shift and collapse, experiences are
transferred like viral infections. *Maria Kizito*, which depicts a series of incidents in the Rwandan genocide that took place at the convent of Sovu and shows the nuns complicity in the murders that took place there, provides a clear example of this. An outsider, American Nun Teresa who travels to Belgium to watch the trial of Kizito, is transported to the scene at Sovu by her desire to understand what Maria, ‘someone so nearly like me,’ was thinking. Indeed, she leads the nuns in prayers, reading from the ‘Bible of genocide.’ The story of the massacres is in turn told by voices of victims, survivors, nuns, the radio and even the fire that burned many victims alive. The language moves between incantation, prayer, testimony and poetry. The dramaturgy of the play effects a constant slippage – or drift – between perspectives.

In making the arguments of this article it is important to finally reconcile Ehn’s defense of the importance of commemorating genocide with Ranciere’s injunctions against a ‘culture of perpetual mourning.’ Ehn writes, ‘I don’t want the plays of *Soulographie* to contain the history or repeat the history – I want them to provoke a memory of history, even if you haven’t remembered it. I want to create a space for remembering by going there’ (68). How can this ethos be read in ethical terms that contest the violent abjection that underlies the culture of mourning as articulated by Ranciere? In what ways is Ehn’s work an ‘art of the unrepresentable’?

What such a writing strategy finally means for Ehn is that mercy and empathy are ‘impersonal.’ That is, empathy is collective in character and arises through and because of the diftedness of subjectivity. Conversely, violence arises through ‘immobility,’ and when we are the ‘citizens of our own states.’ The language of
Ehn’s plays constructs dramatic worlds that pivot around this dialectic and attempts to unknit violence through loosening its personality.

The impersonality of mercy and empathy as described by Ehn may be usefully compared to what Rancière calls the ‘third thing’ or third way. Empathy is not so much transferred from one party to another – inspired in the author by what they have witnessed, and then passed onto the actor, then to the spectator and so on. Rather it is a form of immanence that asks for our contemplative attention. Ehn’s writing and \textit{Soulographie} as a staged event is something other than the postdramatic as described by Lehman; it does not belong to a tradition of alienating or estranging the audience though it demands much of them as listeners. Drifted subjectivity is a vision of the world that breaks down the oppositions of spectator and actor, self and other, here and there. It does not seek to colonize – in the sense where ‘– where the subject of witness becomes the virtue of the witness (replacing the suffering of what we see with the suffering of our seeing…))’\textsuperscript{66} – but instead recognizes the mutuality of responsibility and seeks to overcome the sovereignty of the self. The drifted self – the drifted spectator – retains agency (not simply the appearance of agency) and yet understands that they are un-apart from the pains of others, even if not fully comprehended, and indeed constituted by them. As Ehn commented after one of the \textit{Soulographie} sessions, ‘genocide is a spiritual crisis’ and a ‘real force in the world.’ Through its illusory theatrical world \textit{Soulographie} asked the community gathered around it to ‘be awake to it – to know that it is real and to be ready to take action when the time is right.’ The event was underpinned by the belief that this is work that each of us are capable of undertaking.

‘Engaging in stripped, fragmentary, splintered description – engaging – is resistance […] We insist that powerlessness, the remnant, the margin […] remain sites for action
Though grace of stutter, and language otherwise pulled from our authority, we have living access to good and evil.’ (10)

Conclusion

Janelle Reinelt has cautioned against a wholesale movement away from the explicitly political in the theatre, writing, ‘I see scholars turning away from a discredited ‘identity politics’ to a preference for participatory, non-didactic postdramatic theatre [...] I worry that direct engagement with issues and representational strategies that analyse or argue are being too quickly disparaged.’ Might Ehn’s plays constitute a kind of middle way?

In The Emancipated Spectator Rancière writes:

What our performances [...] verify is not our participation in a power embodied in the community. It is the capacity of anonymous people, the capacity that makes everyone equal to everyone else. This capacity is exercised through irreducible distances; it is exercised by an unpredictable play of associations and dissociations.

Where is the third thing in this equation, that which, being owned by no one, establishes a ‘scene of equality’ between spectator and actor? Such equality must not be understood in superficial terms, for what it implies is an equality of responsibility, which is to say a positive identification of one’s self as the bearer of collective
obligation. Anonymity means that such responsibility is, as Ehn puts it, impersonal. It does not mean freedom at the cost of the liberty of others. As this pertains to theatre, we should not confuse an ethics of emancipation with immersive or participatory paradigms that merely alter or reverse the terms of theatrical-social relations while retaining a dialectic of knowledge and ignorance. Nor should we seek to eviscerate theatrical illusion taking it to be the cause of a stupification of spectators. Rather, emancipated spectatorship should be understood as theatre that recognizes the significance of contemplative practice and that seeks to engage both actors and spectators in a shared contemplative process that might generate new and unforseen ways of ‘chang[ing] something of the world we live in’ through modelling listening as ethical practice.

2 Ibid., 21.
3 Ibid., 21-2
9 Misadventures in Universality
14 Proposing an analytical model Fischer-Lichte suggests three conditions that might enable a potentially transformative theatrical experience: firstly, a reversal of the subject-object relation of the performance event through the participation of the spectator; secondly, by way of constituting a sense of community between actors and audience, and within the audience; thirdly, by instances of contact made between audience and actors: Erika Fischer Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A new aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2008), 40.
19 Ibid., 172.
20 Ibid., 143.
24 The Emancipated Spectator, 17.
30 Butler, 20.
33 Ibid., 187.
35 Dissensus, 196
37 “Misadventures in Universality”
38 Ehn, “Channels of Witness,” 70.
39 For further information about the plays, Ehn’s reflective account of *Soulographie* published in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* contains a useful summary of the plays accompanied by framing questions for each.
40 Erik Ehn, interview by author, November 15, 2012.
41 Ibid., 248.
42 Ehn, “Channels of Witness,” 84.
44 Ibid., 15.
48 Matthew Causey and Fintan Walsh (Eds), *Performance, Identity and the Neo-Political Subject* (London: Routledge, 20xx), x.
54 Ibid., 13.
55 Ibid., 230.
56 Ibid., 241.
57 Ehn, interview with author.
59 Marc Robinson, *Soulographie*, back cover.
62 Ibid., 78.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 8.
65 Ibid., 10.