

Play Pretend Backstage

A meditation on the work of Eva- Cecilie Richardsen

By Kristian Skylstad

In the Canadian horror film *Cube*, Vincenzo Natali brings to stage a narrative which reduces the human being to an actor on a stage, but this stage is a room. Every square room has a hatch on every wall, leading to other identical rooms, but with different colors. They are in fact locked inside a Rubik's Cube, the scale of which scale is incomprehensible, and which twists and turns constantly, so when they've escaped into a new area; east, west, north, south, it doesn't matter. They are moving around like rats in a maze, but a tesseral and four dimensional maze, with traps set up to wipe them out. None of the individuals in the group know why they are there, no one remembers how they got there. The team that is put inside this system of claustrophobic horror consists of a mathematician, a psychologist, an escape artist, an autistic savant and an individual unwilling to reveal his function in society to the others. The team collapses gradually, some are killed by the traps lurking inside the 20.000 rooms the Cube consists of, they constantly collaborate and turn against each other, on turn. After a while the man not willing to reveal his function discloses that the cube has been made by a shadowy bureaucracy, and that he was himself involved in the shaping of the outer shell. The original function of the cube has been forgotten by its creator, it has been put to use for the sake of usage only, and the five contestants or collaborators has have been put inside of it to reveal its architectural and mechanical function. Putting all their skills together they manage to find the bridge to an exit, but conflict within the team has turned their collaboration violent, and in the end destructive, and the autistic savant is the only member of the group to step outside the labyrinth alive.

In "Building Method" by Eva- Cecilie Richardsen, a young woman is explaining the different planes of generating a space, playing with the walls, the floor, rationalizing something totally abstract to me. She's saying says; "all angles have their own story." She talks about using weight as a tool, when you change the weight of one element, the whole structure needs to change, or it simply collapses. This meditative document reminds me of playing Jenga on a beach in Cambodia, and I remember thinking, elevated on whiskey; "why not just get really good at this?" Stay there, doing that, at the time it felt like as meaningful as my whole career. My ambition was to keep the tower intact, not to win, the suspense of it. Jenga is a responsible collaboration, not a contest. The "actor" in Richardsen's "movie" says; "one is always dragged in one direction or the other." In *Cube* they soon realize that they might have survived, had they stayed in the first room, then a gate would have appeared eventually, and the first room had no traps, except silence. The enemy would not have been pitfalls, fatigue or the system, but their boredom, restlessness and limited creativity. That was the experiment; to prove that the human beings need to move on, need to compete, need to conflict, need to dominate, need to excel. We do not have the stamina to wait. I believe the people in Richardsen's scenery would have survived, finding the cube as space an interesting vessel to play in, naively waiting for the school bell to ring. All angels have their own story.

The movie *Cube* appears to be extremely complex, with what is seemingly a stage made with advanced machinery, but really it's filmed exclusively in a relatively small and square room, the verticalization generated by simply twisting the camera. When the actors escape one room, they in reality enter the same room again, marking the change with new colors in the next/same

room; the illusion is complete, like the experiment *Dogville* by Lars von Trier or *Tape* by Richard Linklater. This generates a suspense, which can seldom (at least without an extremely clever psychological manipulation) be experienced in cinema. The reasons? The feeling of the stage is present, and the feeling of a stage always generates a sensation of being trapped. While cinema can be borderless, if you ignore the facts of logistics and economy, the stage is a room where limits are underlined physically, but depleted on an esoteric level. I can not imagine a more exclusive space than a Theater, an Opera, a Ballet. Interestingly enough the limits of the stage give emphasis to the ever hungry human. The divine being's search for freedom on stage creates a room of action which is unheard of in the tradition of cinema. This freedom would seem pretentious if applied to the real world. Cinema is fed, it's bloated. Any attempts to use the strategies of free art in cinema will surely be reduced to an experiment (which is not a compliment in ruling social circles) and attempts to undermine this conservative view fast becomes a Sisyphus process.

Eva- Cecilie Richardsen is printing photographic work on wooden boards, shot with a simple iPhone, of people (I believe mostly dancers), props (theater props I guess) and fabric (curtains?) These photographs are interestingly communicating more with the Decisive Moment than a well established and inflated artistic practice; the staged photograph. Done in a room begging for staged photographs, they are more in touch with the reportage tradition of Henri Cartier-Bresson or Robert Frank than photographers with a more theatrical output, like Philip Lorca DiCorcia or Jeff Wall. There is a photographic compromise unfolding here, but also a deep understanding and respect for the non possibility of an exact reenactment of a moment, which in its essence is an idea that is completely classical. Teju Cole recently said that with time seemingly moving so fast, looking for the classical decisive moment is radical. What is a decisive moment? It's an act of complete balance, from the eye of the beholder. This is explained thoroughly by Cartier-Bresson in a geometrical manner, but the painter Edgar Degas says it better; "my chief interest in dancers lies in rendering movement and painting pretty clothes." He painted on interest, based on his evaluation of total beauty, which is movement. It's ironic that the greatest experts on movement, the photographers, are the ones who need to shut it up, keep it still. Edgar Degas painted dancers, that was his project, and Halévy said of Manet, Degas and Cézanne; "They pursued their work without asking anything of anyone." I believe I witness the same in Eva- Cecilie Richardsen, a need for not asking anything of her surroundings, but also the need for being a witness, or even a dynamo, a real one. Real aesthetics isn't related to practice. You're born with a photographic eye and mind, you'll never inhabit it with practice, even though you might be able to hide your inadequacy. Like a vulture Richardsen flies in circles around her prey, which is the scenery unfolding; framing, changing perspectives, her motives seem beaten, worn, but vital still, and everything paradoxically enveloped in theatrical light, staged for dance, but careless on the verge of randomness.

In "Double Room" Richardsen films a woman lifting and changing fabric, the sound envelops you totally, the movements have a hypnotic force, almost primal. Ongoing, without purpose, she lifts and folds the heavy fabric, knowing very well that the only point of the action is the act itself. I can't see any self-consciousnesses in the girl doing this, nor can I extract any meaning from the act, but I experience a *Déjà déjà vu*; a monk doing the same in Nong Khiaw, along the Mekong river, the same grace, the same burden. It gave me the same tranquil sensation, the act as act, which is what the camera is there to freeze. One would almost be tempted to call it purity, if one were so audacious. We want to swim in movement, swim in light, swim in text, swim in bodies, waves, dunes. And we do, but it's hard when you're not asleep, and our dreams are the hostages

of your memories. Our dreams have the Stockholm syndrome, they love their jailer; memory.

In 1992 Francis Fukuyama famously depleted history, and thus he did with time what Nixon did to currency in the seventies, by removing the gold standard. The zeitgeist born through this Hegelian mentality has turned into consensus rapidly, an idea as almighty as IBM's Big Blue in Chess. The free performance function as both as a rebellion and a rejection of this approach to society and time, life and art. Acting has always been constant, it has always been present, and it has always been contemporary, but with means that makes the whole notion of the mainstream contemporary discussion absurd in the most Camusian way imaginable. Everything on a stage must seemingly come naturally, it's either life or suicide: You repeat until you fail, and when you fail your narrative die, to come alive. The pure play can't be kidnapped, it can't be raised or domesticated, it can't be swallowed by history. Our time is like a Rubik's Ccube, and tendencies boil like a Tesla Ccoil, but pure acting, pure orchestra, pure dance, pure song, they all transcend both. It swallows it raw, it swallows it whole. The stage in a TV-series is the characters, the narrative, the geographical space in which the actors can move through the seasons. On a stage you can go anywhere in minutes, even seconds, and then I mean EVERYWHERE. On a stage anyone can be anyone, any dream can be staged. On the stage we can potentially play pretend. Illusions don't need to be plausible, the fundament can be torn. A unique idea can be developed, and the consequences are none, because the stage is never fair to the camera. You have to be present to judge it, and when the show is over it's over, the documentation of it a shadow. This shadow is often forgotten. It was about that, when it happened there, when. The stage leaves you behind when you leave it behind. But what is a stage?

A stage, to the audience, is a nourishing point for the eye of the beholder. While some sees the necessity of the stage as only as a way of preserving traditions, others opens the term "stage" up to be the rooms we dwell in constantly; the bedroom a stage like any other, here the dance, breathing, dreams and drama is more valuable than any Nutcracker at Sydney Opera House in Sydney. It's even a production facility for children. For the random man stage means spectacle. Yoko Ono and John Lennon hackneyed this with Bed-In, and this insipid and stereotyped humdrum made us aware of the bed as stage. Great. Since then everybody on the rich part of the sphere has swallowed Shakespeare's words; "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages." Godard's answer to that was something like; "To be or not to be. That's not really a question." I'm diving deeply into banality here for a reason. The problem at the moment, in the world, is not that so many has have a need for expression, it's that so many has have so much to say about it;, too many dwellers. Ad Reinhardt once claimed that art is art and everything else is everything else, if that's so everything else seems more tempting to me, and obviously most people in general. So fuck the stage. Let's dive deeply into the black hole behind the stage, where there is no audience, where the rules are non existent, where acts alone matter as acts, but also matter. The space where movement becomes material, where material moves, and tenaciousness drips like the body of the corpse of a gangster melted in acid in a bathtub, erupting downwards into the hallway underneath, dripping down onto a poor motherfucker tied to a pole in the basement. In 2010 Godard turned a cruise ship into a stage, and by doing so made us aware of how vulgar it is. What is interesting is what happens backstage. Any teenage girl who's been dragged backstage in at a concert knows this. The experience might not be comfortable, but it's real. The real drama unfolds in silence, or not at all, it stays within us. We keep it like a treasure. In Godard's movie the drama is the wave, beating against the metal of the vessel, suspended in space.

In "Throwback" Eva- Cecilie Richardsen shows a woman throwing her hair, leaning back, pushing her body forwards, then caressing a microphone, not saying anything, not singing. Continuously she does this, the camera catches it with selective focus, close up, jump cut. It's a video, but the stage is present, through the light, the blackness of the room, but it's backstage. The audience is not present.

The work seemingly has no intentions. Hair, light, face, focus, it all becomes an opaque entity, a meditative suspense, on the line of old slow motion super 8 video of whatever. You just want to stay in it, with it, diving into the potential of it, staying there until there is no oxygen left, until boredom devours you. For Eva- Cecilie Richardsen's intention is not interesting, because her work obviously doesn't search for an endpoint. It stays a secret, unfolding constantly, accepting the aesthetics of the backstage, or the theatrical space as a practice space, removing the drama, revealing the nakedness of it. Writing about her work easily becomes a Sisyphus process, trying to grasp and grapple the vague topics, the tender sceneries, as it unfolds. I realize now, at the end of this text, which is now a stage, that I'm not the mathematician, the psychologist, the escape artist, or a collaborator in generating the cube which that Eva- Cecilie Richardsen has built, twisting illogically, unfolding constantly. I'm the autistic savant, I don't belong in this room, therefore she invites me in. Not to look at it with "fresh eyes", or understanding it, but to do what Deleuze claimed was the most interesting interpretation; the misinterpretation, . I am here to misunderstand the project, which is no project, but becomes one by laying layer by layer, unfolding nothing, unfolding it still, and now me as an individual, and this text as my trace, it's only an element in a system so vast, so incomprehensible, so harmonic, so silent, that I shouldn't have used one dot, or one comma, but growls, moans and murmurs. Her work is visceral, and therefore venomous, generous and takes the risk of being incredibly boring. The stage to her is a plateau, and when one plateau is created, compromised and evaluated, she moves on to a new one. The new plateau might be less interesting, more or less challenging, the point is moving on as a creator, a witness or a recorder. This assemblage communicates with all genres. It's simply there until it's not, and then it has been there, and it has always been there, because it was at one point, and what was at one point always is and always will be, playing pretend backstage.

All these people, like puppets, in a scenery, standing or moving, and the camera of our eyes recording it to memory. What is kept, what is evaluated, it happens by random, that is if we're honest with ourselves. What might be most real is also the most unbearable, most feeble. We don't have the patience, most of us, to stay on the stage which is the interlude in the gab between the events, and that is what makes us stuck in that space, which is not a space, not a stage, not reality. Eva-- Cecilie Richardsen is dealing with the lacuna, the missing part, not coming together as a whole, but staying separate, not concluded, with more than 20.000 ways of interpretationing them. She moves on without moving on. She stays while not staying. Only when you can act on stage when off stage and off stage when on stage, only then can we talk about an act worthy to register. What is at stake here is developing the language of a stage into an endless thesaurus, where everything is what it seems, but also something else, slightly altered, again and again: Practice as performance.

In "Hole In Wall" two individuals, one man and one woman, are whispering through a transient wall, describing sceneries. At one point the woman is whispering about a man that is leaning onto a wall, exhausted, not able to walk. He's trying to hold lean on the wall, but the wall is too

slippery. The end of the video is the woman describing a body which has been bricked down into the floor, a bit like the people in the first paragraph of this text. This whispering, to me, generates a much more vivid image in my mind at the point when I try to hear her words, through a wall, into a microphone, through a computer, and finally opened up in VLC media player on my laptop, than any performance grand scale. Maybe the man will stand there forever, tired and leaning, attempting to hold himself up against the greasy wall, maybe that is an eternal image. Maybe we create eternal images by following seemingly ephemeral whims, at least that's where poetry is created, a poetry feeding on life and time, space and stagnation. Maybe the tired man is the autistic savant, which who managed to get out of the cube, onto the bridge, over the gap, into the threshold. I believe it's him we emulate when attempting to break free from the ropes that binds us, the roles we play. We should embrace the floor, like in Richardsen's "Verticalization of Ground" sleep outspread, calm as a cucumber, then tear the fundament of what lies underneath us, into a ball, violently. Maybe the autistic savant was only an actor, that liquidated everyone, or allowed them to devour each other. Perhaps he survived by playing pretend.