Thinking anew, every time: An encounter with Judith Butler

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Nominally, public events in the university system are an opportunity to engage academics in a curated space, around certain themes and to give witness to that engagement by other academics, students, thinkers and a wider public. This curated or intentional space is usually provided to test or experiment thoughts, to open up and broaden the boundaries of intellectual discussion. One welcomes with enthusiasm, therefore, events, and the growing number of seminars, workshops, keynote lectures, panels and conferences. One imagines new symposia, extends and accepts new invitations, creates new panels and forums, eager for new spaces to engage.

And yet the experience of the event is often far from this initial sense of productive possibility. At a recent architectural public lecture, a student, books in hand, approached the speaker and related that she was disappointed. Disappointed with the lecture, disappointed in him. Far from an isolated incident, this frank encounter between speaker and audience unveils, perhaps, a common misidentification. Somehow, despite the proliferation of events, and perhaps in part because of it, events themselves – their purpose or potential, their failure or success – are hardly reflected upon. Instead, the personification of the possibility of thoughtful engagement in the figure of the author or speaker, leads to an attribution of success or failure to the person and not to the event itself.

Recent consideration given to the effects of trends in research and teaching funding, and to the way professional academic landscapes of career planning, promotion, publishing and repute are continually being restructured along managerial lines, uncovers a push towards a context that turns every academic into a curator, a participator, a respondent, a chair, a conference,

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symposium or panel organizer, a paper presenter, an invited panel member, a roundtable discussant, a keynote speaker of at least so many events every year. The endless performance and increasing generation of these often unpaid roles becomes the necessary accompaniment to teaching and writing. More and more the event itself – its production and sustainment – becomes the end, rather than a valuable means. Remarkably, these issues are almost never thought alongside the content of these occasions, let alone discussed and worked through in their preparation.

The point here is not to suggest that the growing number of initiatives is in any way wrong in and of itself[1], much less to imply that events should always, of necessity, be successful (indeed, very often failure offers the opportunity for an opening: some mistakes are important mistakes to have made[2]), or that success should be measured against any particular standard, or that this success could be unanimous in any case. Rather, the thoughts here arise from a feeling of dissatisfaction, and by a sense that understanding this dissatisfaction, rather than merely criticising or offering an easy verdict of 'moderate' success, is important. Specifically, we intend to grapple with the proposition that there is, perhaps, a connection between a compulsion to produce events and to endlessly collaborate presentially (and publically) with others, and the loss, sometimes, of a critical approach towards these very activities themselves. A proliferation of a discourse populated by surely positive words such as conversation, interdisciplinarity, opening up (to the floor, to the panel), discussion, improvised response, and so forth has made it seemingly irrelevant to engage the events themselves, to try to understand what takes place (or fails to take place) within them, the kinds of opportunities, beyond empty rhetoric, we think or hope they will bring about. Or, even, what indeed is it that we expect when we attend or participate in an event? And how or why is this expectation fulfilled or disappointed?

But this is meant to be a review. The event in question was seductively titled 'An Encounter with Judith Butler,'[3] and was organized by the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster. It took place over a day from 10.00am to 7.00pm on Friday 4 February 2011 in Fyvie Hall at the University of Westminster. The event was structured as two roundtables addressing the work of Judith Butler and a keynote public lecture by Butler herself. The first roundtable entitled 'Judith Butler's Contribution to Contemporary Ethical and Political Issues' brought together Vikki Bell, Elena Loizidou, Isabell Lorey and Stewart Motha, with chair Chantal Mouffe. After lunch, the second roundtable centred on 'Judith Butler's Contribution to Gen-

der Theory' and had Terrell Carver, Mandy Merck, Henrietta Moore and Leticia Sabsay as discussants, and Harriet Evans as chair. Each panel member spoke for roughly 10 minutes, followed by a response from Butler, and then questions and answers from the floor. At 5pm, the room cleared, and the audience re-entered a packed house for Butler's public lecture tentatively titled 'The Right to Appear – Towards an Arendtian Politics of the Street,' a continuation of the themes explored in some of her most recent lectures in London,[4] namely issues related to mournability, state violence and cohabitation, specifically in relation to Israel and Palestine, and which are to constitute the basis of a forthcoming book.

The brief reflections that follow will focus, not so much on the details of themes or specific content of the interventions, but rather will try to engage the event from a different register, outlined in the musings above. Thinking 'events' through 'An Encounter with Judith Butler' is an especially interesting point of departure, for its structure provided for a broad range of interventions and modes of conversation: two very different but similarly organized roundtables, and a public lecture. Interestingly, despite the fact that all the sessions took place on the same day, in the same room, to (roughly) the same audience, the event as a whole provided radically disparate experiences: a strong first panel took up diverse modes of engagement with Butler's work, and challenged each other's interventions in creative ways that opened up to a dynamic, if not always coherent (but, then, one should question the necessity of coherence), discussion. A second panel offered somewhat disjointed presentations that, although possibly individually strong, failed entirely to reach out towards one another or towards the audience. Even Butler's thought-provoking lecture contrasted sharply with a somewhat disjointed and virtually chair-less Q&A that ended with a visibly exhausted speaker and a rapidly-dispersing room. What is the nature of this apparently arbitrary breakdown or disengagement – of panels, of sessions or sometimes of whole events? The tentative suggestion here is that often this failure is rooted in a basic misunderstanding of the kinds of interactions, or more precisely, the kind of thinking, that takes place (or can take place) in an event, with others, and how this interaction is to be curated and participated in.

In the Q&A of a lecture delivered at Birkbeck, University of London, in 2010 Judith Butler remarked, while scribbling on a paper before answering a question: 'Some of us need to write to think (...) I've never thought that thinking takes place in the mind (…) It's a radically exterior kind of event, which may also be true about memory.'[5] The remark was said in passing and in a somewhat joking

tone. And yet something important echoes here.

To be sure, the mind-body binary has long been refigured, with the labour of the mind now mostly considered to be inextricably related to the materiality of the body and to the multiplicity of textures, both material and immaterial, within and through which a thinking and acting subject emerges. However, the fact that we can still assume to understand the distinction between those very words – 'mind' and 'body'–, still come to place expectations on those same assumed understandings, and, furthermore, still imagine them as reliable sites for different kinds of work, is precisely what needs continued refiguring. Perhaps, we could argue, it is the misplaced expectation of labour on an assumed reliability of a 'subject', that continues to 'do us wrong' as we plan, curate and participate in events. Or perhaps, taking on from Butler, we have it wrong. Perhaps it is not the misidentification of the mind and body in a subject, but the misconception that thinking happens in the mind, that it is a private affair, that thinking is what 'a subject' does, alone.

As it stands, we continue to imagine that subjects think, privately. And so, strangely, this relationship between thinking as action, thinking as an activity at the core of intellectual engagement, and the spatial and temporal materiality of the body that engages it is rarely considered. We continue to imagine that the products of thinking subjects, such as books or articles, are also private, that they are privately constructed 'things' and that they are, somehow, a representation of said private thinking. Of course the historical context of, say, a book may be mentioned, influences and sources copiously noted, or places, relationships and people acknowledged. But even in and despite these gestures, thinking as a process becomes overshadowed by a suspect common-sense notion of thought as an authored, final (usually written) product.[6] Finally, we continue to imagine that the body bearing the name of a subject carries in it, and with it, that private thinking; and since that thinking is attributed to the material body of the thinker, we imagine that it can be called to account for itself at any given time – an event, for instance.

As a consequence of these unreflected-upon imaginaries, the relationship between bodies, spaces of thinking configured as events, and the possibilities brought about by them becomes strangely confused and ambiguous, as it subtly and often inadvertently shifts from thinking to product, and from a notion of relationality to one of simple bodily co-presence. On the one hand, as was mentioned earlier, theorisation of encounters, symposia or conferences mobilise ideas of collaboration and conversation, where the fact of sharing a particular space and time is invoked as the possibility for new thoughts to emerge. This

implies an understanding of thought as a mode of communication, a mode of sharing even, that is made possible through bodies, material spaces and particular temporalities – a notion of thought, therefore, that makes sense only as *thinking*, as a creative and fluid activity that takes place in relation to and with others.

On the other hand, in practice, these same events are, more often than not, curated around particular authorial figures in a way that seems to misinterpret the fact of physically proximate bodies (that is, the fact that bodies are in the same room, on the same roundtable) as, itself, thinking. Or, to put it otherwise, a strange economy of thought ensues, whereby thought is understood to have already taken place elsewhere, already completed, as it were (in a book, perhaps) so that the event becomes an occasion for those thoughts to be gathered and (endlessly) repeated, rather than renewed, rather than *thought anew*. And if bodies are taken to simply represent a moment of past creative and dynamic thinking, then the rubric becomes one of simply placing bodies that matter in the same room and at the same time, with little consideration as to how thinking-as-conversation may be facilitated or even whether that is the desired outcome. Of course authorial figures are (hopefully) more than just 'indexical names', and to some extent every body *is* the embodied presence of the trajectory of the knowledge, engagement and passionate thought in and through which it has been shaped. It cannot, however, *stand for* that thought. Nor does this trajectory necessarily imply the ability or even the desire to extend that knowledge and engagement towards others, to share it presentially with others – the willingness, in other words to take co-presence as an opportunity to think anew within a particular encounter.

The point here is not to moralize or offer judgment or prescriptions over particular types of events or modes of participation. It is not to suggest that a thinker should be willing to share and be challenged in the way described above, much less to imply that one is a better thinker if one is, or a less thorough one if one is not. It is also not an attempt to smooth over the difficulties and dimensions of power relations inherent to different modes of communication, to un-critically celebrate conversation, or to evoke some notion of coherence and consensus – or else difference and dissensus – as if these were uncontested terms. Finally, it is also not a question of whether an event is organized as a lecture or as a roundtable; whether it is mono-disciplinary (if such purity ever exists) or inter-disciplinary, general or highly specialised.

Indeed, it is not that the above considerations are irrelevant or unimportant. Rather, the point is precisely that there is no ready-made formula that guarantees engage-

ment or that conjures the creative relational thinking that makes an event come alive. A carefully crafted and minutely timed choreography of presentations may call forth intensely passionate discussion. A blindly spontaneous gathering may also summon electric and unforeseen results. Sometimes neither will. Perhaps it is the case that the inevitably contingent nature of events may be best engaged by trying to come to terms with the fact that this contingency – which is also its potential – lies in thought itself, in the possibility of thinking-with-others, under unique conditions. And maybe what is called for is a willingness to take on the responsibility and labour, the vulnerability and courage – as curators, speakers, chairs and audience – that this necessarily implies.

Surely these last words are written with Judith Butler in mind. Throughout the day, she worked, thought in conversation – in thorough and careful responses to each panel member, in challenged positions and questions raised during the Q&As, and in a well prepared and dynamically delivered public lecture. Near the end of her talk Butler stated that 'thinking relies on bodily life that cannot be sequestered in any private sense.' Far from private, Butler's contribution is not only in theory, but in *thinking* itself – an engaged thinking, each time anew, and one generously shared with others. Perhaps the day figured as an *encounter* was precisely that.

Endnotes

[1] Although perhaps Arundhati Roy's answer to a question about her (much delayed) 'next' book would be relevant here too: 'There's so much noise in the world, so why add to it? In my case, I only write when I can't not.' See Ian Jack's article 'Arundhati Roy: India's bold and brilliant daughter' in *The Guardian*, 29 January 2011 (accessed 19 March 2011 from http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2011/jan/29/arundhati-roy-interview-india-activism-novel).

[2] This point was made by Edgar Pieterse at a recent talk in reference to an interdisciplinary project that bought urban practitioners and artists together in an event in Cairo – an attempt that 'hasn't worked, but hasn't worked in a really important way'. The suggestion is that mistakes do not make attempts any less valuable or relevant, so long as the oportunity to interrogate the 'failure' is taken up and engaged with rather than refused or covered up. The public lecture, entitled 'African Urbanism', was hosted by LSE Cities, London School of Economics and Political Science on 26 January 2011. Podcast of the event is available at http://www.urban-age.net/events/publicLectures/2011/01/26/african-urbanism/, accessed on 19 March 2011).

[3] The very title of the event is interesting, with a foregrounding of the proper name, 'Judith Butler', that perhaps hints at the ever increasing weight of an academic 'star system' in the organization and draw of certain events.

[4] See 'Forgiveness and Retribution:

Judith Butler in Conversation with Udi Aloni', hosted by The Jewish Book Week 2007 on 04 March 2007; 'Frames of War', hosted by the Humanities and Arts Research Centre of Royal Holloway, the School of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck College, on 04 February 2009; 'Co-habitation, Universality and Remembrance', hosted by the Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck College, on 24 May 2010.

[5] Lecture by Judith Butler entitled 'Co-habitation, Universality and Remembrance', hosted by the Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck College, London 24 May 2010 (podcast available at http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2010/05/judith-butler-co-habitation-universality-and-remembrance/, accessed 19 March 2011)

[6] Perhaps to some extent this being drawn to the idea of 'authorship' is understandably perceived as natural, or even practically necessary – books do, after all, have authors – and this, to be sure, need not in itself signal the return to an autonomous self-referential subject.