Inge Arteel / Silke Felber /
Cornelis van der Haven (eds.)

Susanne Kennedy

Reanimating the Theatre

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Papier aus verantwortungsvollen Quellen
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Susanne Kennedy's Theatre

An Introduction

Inge Arteel, Silke Felber, Cornelis van der Haven

For several years now, theatre director Susanne Kennedy has been prominently present on the German stage, both with her radical adaptations of canonical plays and popular films and with her own creations of profoundly other counterworlds. The productions, some of which have toured internationally, are met with critical acclaim and admiration, but also with irritation and bewilderment. To date, theatre studies has only scarcely met the challenges Kennedy's work poses. This volume, the first edited collection of essays on her work, wants to make a start with the scholarly reception of Kennedy's theatre.

Susanne Kennedy started her career in the Netherlands. Born in Friedrichshafen to a German mother and an English father, she studied theatre in Mainz and Paris before moving to Amsterdam to attend classes in directing at the renowned Hogeschool voor de Kunsten. She graduated in 2005 with a production of Schiller's *Maria Stuart*, for which she was awarded the Top Naeff Prize.[1] For several years, she worked as an assistant director and then as a director at the National Theatre in The Hague and was also engaged as a director at Toneelgroep Amsterdam. Staging authors such as Enda Walsh, Sarah Kane and Elfriede Jelinek, and adapting plays by Ibsen and Lessing, she was applauded for the abstraction and physicality with which she directed her material, the conceptual "precision" of her dramaturgy, her "strong spatial awareness" and the "tensions she provoke[d] between the text and the body language of the actors".[2] In 2014 the Dutch theatre critics awarded her the Critics' Prize (*Prijs van de Kritiek*).

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1   This is the oldest theatre student award of the Netherlands, https://theaterencycloped ie.nl/wiki/Top_Naeff_Prijs (accessed 8 Oct. 2021).

2   Quoted from the jury report of the 2010 Erik Vos award (a biennial award for upcoming

In 2011, Dutch director Johan Simons invited her to the Münchner Kammer-spiele, where she made her debut with an adaptation of Sidney Pollack's film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* Her 2013 Munich production of Marieluise Fleißer's early play *Fegefeuer in Ingolstadt* lead to her breakthrough in the German theatre scene. Several elements of Kennedy's signature aesthetics are already in place here: the actors are put in an enclosed bare space, with proportions that appear distorted. The puppet-like figures hardly interact with each other, the sound is pre-recorded. For *Fegefeuer in Ingolstadt*, Kennedy was awarded the 3sat Prize and named Young Director of the Year by the magazine *Theater Heute.* In 2014, the production was invited to the Berliner Theatertreffen. One year later, in *Warum läuft Herr R. Amok*, an adaptation of the film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Michael Fengler, Kennedy presented her actors wearing latex masks, thereby introducing another key element of her aesthetics. This play too was invited to the Berliner Theatertreffen and augmented her fame as one of the most important up-and-coming directors within the European theatre landscape.

In 2015, Kennedy ventured into the realm of musical theatre. For the yearly theatre festival Ruhrtriennale, she conceived Monteverdi's *Orfeo* as a walk-through *parcours.* Together with Ole Brolin (sound), Rodrik Biersteker (video) and Jurgen Kolb (light), Kennedy created a polyphonic space that kept the audience constantly in motion, mirroring Eurydice's unhappy trajectory through the underworld. It was the first of several productions in which she dissolved the separation between audience space and stage. Kennedy returned to the Ruhrtriennale the following year, with her installation performance *Medea.Matrix* (2016), a cooperation with visual artist Markus Selg.

For the 2017 Munich production *Die Selbstmord-Schwestern* (*The Suicide Sisters*), realised alongside stage designer Lena Newton and costume designer Teresa Vergho, Kennedy received the Europe Prize New Theatrical Realities. Based on the eponymous 1993 novel by Jeffrey Eugenides and its filmic adaptation by Sofia Coppola in 1999, Kennedy's team created an evening that made the boundaries between theatre, installation art and performance seem fragile. The jury of the Europe Prize motivated its decision by the fact that Kennedy succeeded in exploring "the link between theatre and other forms of art and is able to make actors, words and ideas move and intertwine in her works which are performed in spaces that are at times stages and visual art installations".[3]

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theatre makers), http://www.dutchheights.nl/winnaars/erik-vos-prijs-2010-susanne-k ennedy (accessed 8 Oct. 2021). Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations are ours.

In *Women in Trouble* (2018), created at the Berlin Volksbühne, physical and virtual worlds seemed to overlap. On the continuously rotating revolving stage, a clean, seemingly germ-free and yet brightly coloured series of open rooms were designed, in which the masked actors moved to the sound of pre-recorded dialogues. In *Coming Society* (2019), another Volksbühne production, Kennedy and Markus Selg envisaged a future community shared by actors and audience. The audience, limited in numbers, was invited to join the actors on the once again rotating stage and to partake in a journey along several simultaneously present sanctuaries and shamanic practices, resembling an eclectic and meditative rite de passage. Deconstructing the tradition of the proscenium stage, the evening raised elementary questions of coexistence and survival in the anthropocentric age by recourse to Nietzsche's idea of the "Übermensch".

Also in 2019, Kennedy adapted Chekhov's *Three Sisters* at the Münchner Kammerspiele. Though for this production Kennedy worked on a traditional stage, Lena Newton's stage design dissolved, more radically than she had done in *Women in Trouble*, any distinction between virtual and real dimensions, especially regarding the fourth wall as a separation between stage and audience seats. A kind of peep-box seemed to float in the middle of the large image that dominated the fourth wall. With the help of a gauze curtain, the high-tech visuals (Biersteker) cleverly projected onto it and an overwhelming soundscape (Richard Janssen), Kennedy's team provoked a fascinating uncertainty in the audience with regard to the perception of digital and physical space. The production received the Stage Design of the Year award in the critics' survey conducted by the *Theater Heute* magazine.

For *Ultraworld*, which premiered at the Volksbühne in January 2020, Kennedy combined the serial narration of computer games with the epic narratives of the heroic quest into a stunning multimedia production that critics termed both "psychedelic" and "nightmarish".[4] Markus Selg and Rodrik Biersteker were awarded the 2020 Faust prize for stage and video design. *Oracle*, Kennedy's 2020 Munich production, revisited the design of an immersive walk-through *parcours* and adapted it to the COVID pandemic, with single audience members

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3   Quoted from the jury report as rendered on: http://www.greek-theatre.gr/public/gr/gr eekplay/index/newview/1303 (accessed 8 Oct. 2021).

4   Jake Witlen, "Existentialism in 8-bit: ULTRAWORLD at the Volksbühne", in: *Exberliner* (25 February 2020), https://www.exberliner.com/whats-on/stage/existentialism-in-8-bi t-ultraworld-at-the-volksbühne/ (accessed 8 Oct. 2021); Christian Rakow, "Come in and find out", in: *nachtkritik.de* (17 January 2020), https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php? option=com_content&view=article&id=17567:ultraworld-volksbuehne-berlin-sus- anne-kennedy-und-markus-selg-entdecken-schimmer-der-ironie-in-ihrem-transhu- manistischen-theaterprojekt&catid=1629&Itemid=100476 (accessed 8 Oct. 2021).

meeting up with three posthumanly transformed actors and an ancient mythic oracle transformed into an AI entity. For *I AM (VR)*, that premiered in Tokyo in February 2021 and was coproduced by several international theatre institutions, Kennedy's team transformed the *Oracle* production into an exclusively virtual experience of 35 minutes that confronted the spectator with questions on the nature of human ontology, consciousness and singularity.[5]

Reanimating the theatre

In a 2018 interview with the German radio station *Deutschlandfunk* Susanne Kennedy described her view on theatre making as "a kind of reanimation course" for contemporary theatre.[6] Her commitment to reviving theatre does not aim at overcoming its history but rather at confronting high-tech dramaturgy with the ritualistic meaning that has characterised theatre since antiquity. Kennedy's interest therefore is both explicitly timely, addressing the pressing question of what theatre as an "old" medium can mean in times and societies so profoundly shaped by "new" digital media and virtual reality, and also timeless, in that it firmly believes in theatre's unique ability to meaningfully reflect on exactly that question. In her description of that theatrical quality, Kennedy identifies three major aspects: the temporality of a theatre performance as an event in the here and now; the bringing together of the living bodies of actors and audience; and the space or stage that enables that ritualistic assembling in the first place.[7] In all three of these aspects Kennedy confronts, transgresses and fuses "old" and "new" theatrical technologies and aesthetic styles, opening up a realm that, in its simultaneity of incongruous elements, remains indecipherable and uncanny, but also appeals in its invitation to cross the threshold into that other possible world.

Kennedy's theatrical worlds testify to her preoccupation with spiritual questions of life and death, of the processes of living and dying, and her locating these questions within the site of theatre. Drawing on ancient mythological material – as she has explicitly done in *Orfeo – Eine Sterbeübung* and *Oracle*

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5   Since the completion of this manuscript, three further Kennedy shows have premiered: *Jessica – an Incarnation*, another cooperation with Markus Selg (Volksbühne Berlin, 24 February 2022), Kennedy's first full-fledged opera production, a staging of Philipp Glass' *Einstein on the Beach* (Theater Basel, 4 June 2022), and, again with Selg, *Angela (a strange loop)* (Brussels, 11 May 2023).

6   "Eine Art Wiederbelebungskur fürs Theater. Susanne Kennedy im Gespräch mit Karin Fischer", in: *Deutschlandfunk* (3 January 2018), https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/reihe -eine-frage-der-zeit-eine-art-wiederbelebungskur-fuers.691.de.html? dram:article_id=407442 (accessed 8 January 2021).

7   Ibid.

–, non-Western indigenous cultures and shamanistic rituals – the Tibetan Book of the Dead, to name just one –, as well as on the trashy esoterism of consumerist culture, her productions explore ambiguous, floating existential states. These conditions confuse or reverse the oppositions between life and death, presence and absence, reality and virtuality, warm-blooded corporeality and mortification or evacuation of the flesh, always in full awareness of their digital (re)mediation in mediatised and globalised times.[8] Again, it is not a grand gesture of overcoming that is at stake – overcoming the human condition of death – but rather a negotiation with the ontology of dying and the cycle of elementary return. Both processes are not only insolubly linked with all living matter but also traditionally addressed in the ritual of theatre and reworked in digital technologies.

It is therefore no coincidence that structures of repetition, (re)turning and the cyclical, including the variations that open up in their folds, build the dramaturgical concept of Kennedy's productions. The actual time of the theatrical event is thereby confronted with a durational temporality composed of fractured, serialised moments. Kennedy's practice takes it even further in that it stages the mechanics of theatre, the technology that creates this durational temporality – including traditional ones such as the spatial loop of the revolving stage and more recent ones such as computational visual loops – as a meaningful force beyond (human) directorial control.

In the multimedia design of the productions all modes and media are deployed to dynamize the experience of time and space and to transcend the singular human condition into a possible other world. As the short overview of Kennedy's career stages indicated, teamwork is key to this design, with visual, sound and video artists playing a fundamental role in the concept, alongside the stage and costume designers.[9] Several of them have been working with Kennedy more or less continuously, including sound designer Richard Janssen and video-artist Rodrik Biersteker, stage designers Katrin Bombe and Lena Newton, and costume designer Lotte Goos. Visual artist Markus Selg has played a crucial role in Kennedy's installation theatre.

As "scenic ecologies"[10] the high-tech stage design, soundscape, video art and light depend on one another to materialise as an immersive space for

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8   See also Thomas Oberender, "Im Glitch den Vorhang öffnen. Die Regisseurin Susanne Kennedy macht das Betriebssystem unseres digitalen Zeitalters erfahrbar", in: *Theater der Zeit* 12 (2019), pp. 22-25.

9   As Rodrik Biersteker says: "We all play the game together". In: *Programmheft Drei Schwestern*, Münchner Kammerspiele 2019, p. 16.

10   Oberender, op. cit., 2019, p. 25.

the audience, immersion not meaning smooth surrender and thoughtless iden-
tification but rather resulting from a compelling, affective engagement with
the forces of mediation, simulation and artificiality in matters of life and
death. In Kennedy's productions, both performers and audience become part
of the large transformative apparatus that is the theatre.[11] Sometimes it is the
relentless frontal gaze of the actors that transmits this address (as in older
productions such as *Über Tiere*), sometimes it is the invitation to a corporeal
and subjective involvement for each of the audience members, such as with
the walk-in theatrical installation *Coming Society*. Though there certainly is
a spectacular quality to Kennedy's directorial aesthetics, it is not the kind of
spectacle that seeks to overwhelm with the power of aggrandised narratives
and intimidating gestures, on the contrary: Kennedy invites the spectator to
partake in the spectacle of the elementary. Each and every element, be it the
notes of the soundscape, the pixels of digital images, verbal interjections or the
micro-choreographic gestures of the actors, is magnified, presenting them as
the elementary energetic material that the hyperreal world of the play is made
of.

For the actors, Kennedy's theatre equals an "exercise in modesty"[12]: they are
often masked and voiceless – their words are spoken by other people, often
lay actors, and the soundtrack of their speech is synchronised with the actors'
presence. Face and voice, considered natural indicators of individuality and
reliable media of expressivity, and their integration into a dramatic character,
are purposefully decomposed. The corporeal presence of the actor remains key
to Kennedy's theatre, but these bodies too are treated as elementary material,
not meant to play nor represent someone, but asked to upload every detail of
their presence in the carefully choreographed and controlled performance with
energy and intensity, an energy that is in place when the curtain is drawn and
still fills the room when the curtain closes. The interaction between the actors
is similarly non-dramatic. Contrary to the dramatic, psychological play of the
traditional ensemble of actors, in Kennedy's productions the actors relate to each
other from their position and function in the intermedial structure. As elements
within that structure, their interdependence shows itself in the concentrated
attention with which they relate to each other and the technological design.

"Where does the possibility for identification lie?", Kennedy asks, "Which
element do we identify as human? Is it the voice, the face, the hands? Is it
someone who says 'I' on stage?"[13] Kennedy questions these expectations of

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11   Id., p. 24.
12   Dramaturg Helena Eckert in a conversation with Inge Arteel at the Münchner Kam-
     merspiele, 26 June 2019.

identification and radically opts for the impersonal ritual of theatre to involve the audience: it is precisely the mask, in its broadest sense, that opens up unexpected possibilities for projection and imagination. Kennedy shares this interest with Dutch performers Suzan Boogaerdt and Bianca van der Schoot, with whom she co-directed the Dutch production *Hideous (wo)men* in 2013, a performance on the stereotyped gender politics of spectacular culture and the empty self beneath it; their collaboration continued in the *ORFEO* production and at the Volksbühne in Berlin.

Kennedy's interaction with textual material follows a similar principle of disintegration between actor and text. Already in her early adaptations of classical drama (Schiller, Lessing, Ibsen) and most extremely in *Drei Schwestern* the dramatic text is reduced to a few elementary scenes and lines, sometimes compiled out of diverse translations, that are repeated and varied in the performance text. The adaptations thus dramaturgically reflect on the mechanisms of repeatedly restaging a canonised text and counteract any illusion of temporal development. Kennedy's 2008 staging of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, for instance, reverses the time order and starts with Hedda's suicide instead of working towards it. The innovative Dutch theatre culture that had blossomed in the Netherlands and Belgium since the 1980s did not start from a text but from the affordances of an at times grotesque corporeality and site-specific spatiality, and it incorporated everyday language in dramatic text theatre – for instance in Johan Simon's company of the time, Hollandia, founded in 1985. The afterlife of this theatrical movement is radically updated in Kennedy's approach. Performance texts of later shows such as *Medea.Matrix* and *Women in Trouble* are highly intertextual and citational, combining quotes from diverse discursive contexts, ranging from canonised philosophy such as Nietzsche, to social media and tv shows. It is not so much the pop cultural levelling out of discursive hierarchies that is at stake here, nor an interpretative collage of pre-given material, but rather a demonstration of the communicative potentialities and constraints of these highly diverse utterances that are not owned by their speakers, be they as intellectual as a Nietzschean dictum or as banal as a greeting on a smart phone.

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The contributions to this volume deal with Susanne Kennedy's work from different perspectives but almost all of them pay special attention to the

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13   Kennedy quoted in: Sven Ricklefs, "Porträt einer Künstlerin, die Theater macht. Theaterregisseurin Susanne Kennedy", in: *Bayrischer Rundfunk. Kulturjournal* (5 December 2017).

theatrical techniques Kennedy uses in her productions, from acting techniques, costumes and masks to the intermedial dimensions of her most recent work. Kennedy's different approaches to theatrical time, space and body are also recurring issues discussed in this volume, as are thematic approaches that focus on themes such as death, the representation of gender and the boundaries between the human and non-human.

Some contributors have taken a more historical stance towards Kennedy's work. One of them is Karel Vanhaesebrouck, who deals with Kennedy's earlier production *Over dieren* (2010), an Amsterdam production that was based on Elfriede Jelinek's *Über Tiere,* a text about prostitution, trade in women and phallocracy. Vanhaesebrouck is critical of the characterisation of Kennedy's theatre as "baroque", because doing so reduces the baroque to a purely aesthetic matter. Rather than outward display, he argues, the baroque is grounded in a thoroughgoing preoccupation with depth. Baroque is a complex game of showing and hiding, of seduction. In *Over Dieren* there is no seduction, no depth, no playing with reality, according to Vanhaesebrouck. Here, no complex game with illusions and levels of reality, but only the flat reality in its excessive banality. Kennedy's formal treatment of the text and the frontal scenography expertly kills off any suggestion of theatrical illusion that is key to baroque theatrical aesthetics. Through a system of frontality, which radically refuses dramatic perspectivism, Kennedy short-circuits the spectator's culturally conditioned need for empathy. The theatrical universe of *Over Dieren* is, as Vanhaesebrouck demonstrates, a two-dimensional, superficial world, devoid of depth and perspective. Rather than a baroque performance, *Over Dieren* can be considered a mannerist performance, defining mannerism as the art of "exposure", of excess, of exhibitionism.

Cornelis van der Haven draws somewhat different conclusions about the presence or absence of a baroque theatrical aesthetic in Kennedy's earlier work. Van der Haven discusses the tableau-like silent performances in Kennedy's staging of *Fegefeuer in Ingolstadt* (2013), stating that these performances would highlight the (neo)baroque characteristics of Fleißer's play. The artificiality of acting is striking in this production. The movements of the puppet-like actors are blown up by contrasting them with the frozen postures that are suddenly interrupted by these movements. These gestural signs function almost like rhetorical figures in baroque dramaturgy. One element that is typical of Fleißer's play takes on a special meaning in Kennedy's staging: the exchange of gazes. The martyrdom of the main character Roelle consists of a contradiction between the desire to be seen in his suffering and his awareness that this suffering is at the same time intensified by the gaze of the other. Such fields

of tension can also be considered as "baroque". In seventeenth-century plays, the self-conscious martyr that stages his or her own suffering no longer fitted with the selfless submission to suffering that was still associated with "true" martyrdom. In Kennedy's interpretation of Fleißer's play, there is no "true martyrdom". All characters are isolated subjects and captives of their own bodies. Their self-display and frontal acting, together with the subjecting gazes that enforce the gazing of other characters, are not meant to glorify examples of martyrdom but rather demonstrate the impossibility of true social contact, which ultimately transforms all characters into both martyrs and potential torturers.

Gestural signs and gazing also take centre stage in Mathias Meert's contribution about the same production (*Fegefeuer in Ingolstadt*) in which Meert pays special attention to the "pose" as a moment of arrest and retardation. These paused actions enable or force characters to look at other characters, while frontally addressing the audience at the same time. Meert discusses the actors in *Fegefeuer in Ingolstadt* as puppets that remind us of several (popular) theatre traditions, like pantomime and puppet-theatre, but which are also linked to the uncanny. To unpack the alterity of puppets and the experience of the uncanny Meert refers to Freud but also to other sources of inspiration for Kennedy's production that focus on repetition, alienation and alterity, such as the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and the idea of the body becoming in the span of its lifetime a dead body, which seems to refer directly to the alienating appearance of the zombie-like actors on stage. The body is exposed, revealed to be quasi-dead, a fundamental space of alterity. Its movements are interrupted and slowed down. Corporeal gestures are not transparent media of universal and/or pure communication, but are transformed into artificial poses, inspired and modified by cultural history, and caught in the loop of a gradually increasing aesthetics of repetition. Kennedy's artificial "puppets" seem conspicuously at home in their "panic room", a constellation of thematic, structural and communicative ambivalences that transforms the apparent naturalness of the acting body into an artificial state of purgatory.

The dynamics between poses and gazes are also key to Inge Arteel's discussion of two other earlier shows of Kennedy, Horace McCoy's resp. Sydney Pollack's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (both 2011). Arteel analyses how these productions remediate the conventional aesthetics of cinematic melodrama. Bringing back melodrama to the space and time of theatre enables Kennedy to engage with the mechanisms of reproduction that inform the emotional economics of melodrama. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's notion of "slow death" – the economic

condition that sustains life while at the same time exhausting it – and the choreographic concept of "scenic energy regulation" (Sabine Huschka), Arteel first considers Kennedy's reworking of the marathon dance contest at the centre of Sydney Pollack's film adaptation of the McCoy melodrama. Here, Kennedy's dramaturgy zooms in on the relation between performance and spectatorship at the heart of the spectacle. The play's rhythmical energy regulation, performed in a circular theatre arena, exposes the addiction of the characters to the eye of the spectators and turns them into managers of the gaze. In the second production, the Fassbinder play, Kennedy grotesquely inflates the stylization already conspicuously present in Fassbinder's film, thereby radicalising its discomforting effects. Here, she situates the characters' addiction to the gaze in the sphere of sexual visual politics, more specifically those of kitschy, soft porn femininity. A steady, slowed-down micro-choreography supports the characters in their control over their appearances. Situated on the stage of a neo-Baroque theatre, this production engages with the virtual fourth wall as the space where each of the characters negotiates her status as a starlet. The self-confident engagement of Fassbinder's film characters with the framing camera is exchanged for the management of the full exposure in the proscenium arch.

Nancy's conception of the quasi-dead body as a fundamental space of alterity, as discussed by Meert, is a recurring topic in other contributions to this volume, especially in those that address Kennedy's productions since 2015. From that year on, a series of productions were realised in which questions of life and death took centre stage in combination with a theatrical aesthetics of the ritual. The walk-in installation *ORFEO. Eine Sterbeübung (ORFEO. An exercise in dying)*, which debuted at the Ruhrtriennale 2015, can be seen as a starting point for this thematic line in her work. Eva Döhne dives into this case with a contribution that is partly based on her own experience as a visitor of the installation performance, with silent actors wearing full head masks. Their language cannot be heard and only a new interpretation of Monteverdi's opera *L'Orfeo* resonates in the labyrinth of rooms. The performers occupy the spaces with their bodies, do not speak and, according to the spatial arrangement, repeat, seemingly endlessly, movement patterns and positioning. Döhne further investigates the seemingly lifeless and speechless female figures of the installation. One of her conclusions is that all those involved in the installation vacillate between life and death, on the border between being seen and disappearing. Döhne also highlights the gendered manifestations of sexual difference. Mindful of the scarcely or not at all represented narrative of the mythological figure of Eurydice in Ovid's tale, the installation presents a modified reading of the myth, inspired by

Elfriede Jelinek's theatre text *SCHATTEN (Eurydike sagt).* Döhne emphasises the relevance of expanding the reception of the myth through a feminist perspective, as well as the (im)possibility of a representation of Eurydice's position within the framework of this installation.

Silke Felber investigates how Kennedy and her team address questions of living (on) and dying in the productions following *Orfeo – Eine Sterbeübung*, especially in *Women in Trouble*, which premiered at Volksbühne Berlin in 2017. This is done through the lens of an aesthetic paradigm shift that occurs in Kennedy's work after *Orfeo*, with an increased interest in the interaction of auditorium and stage, and that of physical space and digital space. According to Felber, Kennedy's innovative spatial aesthetic provokes a specific temporality within which the relation between life and death (traditionally thought of as dichotomous in the Western world) can be newly experienced. This specific temporality challenges the dichotomy between "live" and "mediatized" still presupposed in Western theatre and performance studies. In doing so, Kennedy's works question the conception of theatre as being based on the binary categories of presentation vs. representation, animate vs. inanimate, and human vs. non-human.

The relevance of the (full head) mask for the representation of the human body between life and death as addressed by Döhne in her analysis of the *Orfeo* installation takes centre stage in the contribution by Birgit Wiens. The artistic examination of masks and the cultural technique of their usage runs like a thread through Kennedy's theatre works. The mask plays an important role in the cult of death and connects to Kennedy's understanding (based on Deleuze and Guattari) of the human face as a "field of death". In her contribution, however, Wiens also reflects on how the mask relates to Kennedy's more general take on theatre as a "theatre of non-protagonists". Kennedy's theatre decidedly breaks with traditional protagonists in defined roles by no longer understanding their faces, facial expressions and visual features as expressions and identity markers of a person or a character. Instead, associatively and in the broad cultural-historical field of reference, it refers to the complex relation of face and mask – also beyond and outside of the stage – and, in a critical turn, to concepts of identity and individuality. Wiens illustrates this with a discussion of *Warum läuft Herr R. Amok?* (2015), *Drei Schwestern* (2019) and *Die Selbstmord-Schwestern* (2017). Particularly in the latter production the link between the mask and death is indisputably present. The production focusses on the secrets of three sisters who act like the "living dead", wearing heavy colourful masks (only with an opening for the mouth). On the threshold of life and death and dreaming about

suicide, the masks of these characters can be understood as a reference to their death wish.

The mask can also be seen as a marker of another crucial element of Kennedy's work: the way in which she uses the theatre to reflect on its own theatrical traditions of mediation. As discussed by Wiens, the mask enables Kennedy to let her work reflect on a theatrical device that has been used from ancient theatre onwards, connecting it with more universal questions about how we as humans actually interact today with other "embodied" images such as sculptures, paintings, photographs, films and more. This potentiality of the medium to become self-reflective is further explored in the contribution of Maurício Perussi. Perussi discusses the techniques of projection in Kennedy's staging of *Drei Schwestern*. At the beginning of that performance, the audience is confronted with an insurmountable barrier: the view is completely obstructed by a white wall made of a tightly stretched fabric, and it is absolutely impossible to see anything that is behind this barricade. An astonishing landscape is projected on that frontal screen, a landscape that collapses through a kind of explosion. Perussi interprets this opening scene as a way to think about the stage as something that folds itself, as if closing the eyelids to stare at its own internal images, confronting the spectator with a spectacular introspection. Perussi considers *Drei Schwestern* as a theatrical spectacle that meditates on its own ontology. By undertaking a self-reflexive practice, this work presents its reflections primarily for itself, showing itself to us as reflected in its own thoughts. Therefore, we would be facing a performance that is concerned with meditating on the action of time and how it affects bodies, beings and objects, while at the same time making these bodies, beings and objects produce the time on which the performance wishes to meditate. In doing so, through the obstinate reaffirmation of a recursive pattern, the spectacle generates a self-perceptual shaking in itself that resounds in the spectator's perception, opening up for both of them the opportunity for a transformative change of perspective.

The transmedial techniques that are needed to realise the spectacular experience of the audience in productions like *Drei Schwestern* are also discussed by Janine Hauthal. Hauthal's focus is on the transmedial device of the loop that Kennedy employed in the aforementioned production as well as in *Ultraworld* (2020) and *Women in Trouble* (2017). Centring on *Drei Schwestern*, Hauthal investigates the loop as a compositional principle in the interaction of scenography, video, sound, speech, and life action. By comparing the loop to the related principles of repetition and cyclicity, she elucidates the cultural and cognitive reflexivity of Kennedy's theatre aesthetics that has so far been rarely discussed. Building on musicological research, she shows how the repetitive subjectivities

of Kennedy's theatre – embodied in an exemplary way by the eponymous three sisters of the 2019 production – reflect the way repetition functions as a cultural practice in the medial and mediatised consumer societies of our time. Especially Kennedy's inclusion of the serial formats of television, video games and digital self-portraiture suggests that using and consuming these media contributes to society's repetitive entrainment. Moreover, drawing on Douglas R. Hofstadter's notion of the "strange loop", Hauthal argues that this notion affords Kennedy's "radical signature" through and against the self-tangled worlds that her *Drei Schwestern* and other works create on stage. Hauthal's chapter thus demonstrates how Kennedy's treatment of Chekhov's play does not just illustrate the drama of subjectivity in contemporary Western cultures of repetition, it also becomes a self-reflexive assertion of (authorial) consciousness against repetitive entrainment.

Ulrike Haß argues that digital virtual realities in Kennedy's theatre are fundamentally considered as possible worlds that do not represent alternative spaces, but rather play with a different dimension of time. Like in Hauthal's contribution, the concept of the loop is taking centre stage here. According to Haß, Kennedy's loops confirm the ritualised temporality of her theatre, and at the same time they modulate it in such an extreme overstretching way that it almost comes to a standstill, creating an experience of time that slows down the action so that it becomes alien to us. In the virtual reality of Kennedy's later plays, the gates and digital portal architectures blur the spatial distinction between "in" and "out". This not only makes notions of spatial dimensions obsolete, the same is true for the experience of time, as Haß discusses in her reading of Kennedy's production *Ultraworld* (2020). Haß also pays special attention to the blurred boundaries between human and non-human and like Wiens she considers the characters in Kennedy's plays as non-protagonists, creatures that don't have a face nor a voice as expressions of their individuality. Face and voice are inexpressive bodily elements, placed in a virtual reality that is indefinable as well. According to Haß, time, space and bodies in Kennedy's theatre work together to enable us to reflect upon our own wish of "becoming imperceptible" (*unwahrnehmbar-werden*).

This volume is the result of a workshop on the theatre of Susanne Kennedy that took place in Brussels on January 23-25, 2020, just before the pandemic made live social events impossible. It was organised and sponsored by the research group Thalia, a joint research group of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and Ghent University. We want to thank the Brussels based Royal Institute for Theatre, Cinema & Sound (RITCS) for providing the space and logistic support for the workshop, as well as the Doctoral School of Human Sciences of the VUB

for financial support. We thank Thomas Chadwick for his assistance in editing the volume and Parham Aledavood for the draft transcription of the interview with Susanne Kennedy. We especially wish to thank Susanne Kennedy for her presence and the permission to publish the artist talk.

Overview of Susanne Kennedy's productions[14]

Author, title – main production venue – date of the first night

Heiner Müller, *Kwartet* – Theaterschool Amsterdam – 2002-06-06

Tennessee Williams, *Ik kan me morgen niet voorstellen* – Theaterschool Amsterdam – 2003-02-17

Franz Xaver Kroetz, *Männersache* – De Regiedagen, Amsterdam – 2004-07-01

Friedrich Schiller, *Maria Stuart* – De Regiedagen, Amsterdam – 2005-06-30

Susanne Kennedy, *Variaties op Jackie O.* – Gasthuis Werkplaats & Theater, Amsterdam – 2006-04-12

Sarah Kane, *Phaedra's Love* – Het Nationale Toneel, Den Haag – 2007-01-20

Susanne Kennedy, *Barbie Doesn't Live Here Anymore* – Gasthuis Werkplaats & Theater, Amsterdam – 2007-04-04

Falk Richter, *Electronic City* – Gasthuis Werkplaats & Theater, Amsterdam – 2007-09-21

Gesine Danckwart, *Dagelijks brood* – Het Nationale Toneel, Den Haag – 2008-04-17

Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler* – Het Nationale Toneel, Den Haag – 2008-12-04

Marius von Mayenburg, *Parasieten* – Het Nationale Toneel, Den Haag – 2009-05-07

Enda Walsh, *The New Electric Ballroom* – Het Nationale Toneel, Den Haag – 2009-12-03

Generatie Oost – Theaterwerkplaats Generale Oost, Amsterdam – 2010-01-17

Elfriede Jelinek, *Over dieren* – Het Nationale Toneel, Den Haag – 2010-04-15

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Emilia Galotti* – Het Nationale Toneel, Den Haag – 2010-11-04

Harold Pinter, *Het verjaardagsfeest* – Het Nationale Toneel, Den Haag – 2011-05-12

Horace McCoy, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* – Münchner Kammerspiele – 2011-02-27

Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *De bittere tranen van Petra von Kant* – Het Nationale Toneel/NTGent, Den Haag/Gent – 2011-10-21

Henrik Ibsen, *Kleine Eyolf* – Het Nationale Toneel/NTGent, Den Haag/Gent – 2012-05-03

Marieluise Fleißer, *Fegefeuer in Ingolstadt* – Münchner Kammerspiele – 2013-02-08

Bianca van der Schoot, Suzan Boogaerdt, Susanne Kennedy, *Hideous (Wo)men* – Toneelgroep Oostpool, Arnhem – 2013-11-05

August Strindberg, *De pelikaan* – Toneelgroep Amsterdam – 2014-03-23

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14   The information on the earlier productions is taken from the Dutch website *TheaterEncyclopedie*, https://theaterencyclopedie.nl/wiki/Susanne_Kennedy (accessed 8 Oct. 2021).

Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Warum läuft Herr R. Amok* – Münchner Kammerspiele –
   2014-11-27
Susanne Kennedy, Suzan Boogaerdt, Bianca van der Schoot, *ORFEO. Eine Sterbeübung* –
   Ruhrtriennale / Kaleidoskop – 2015-08-20
Susanne Kennedy and Markus Selg, *Medea.Matrix* – Ruhrtriennale – 2016-09-15
Susanne Kennedy after Jeffrey Eugenides, *Die Selbstmord-Schwestern / The Virgin Suicides*
   – Münchner Kammerspiele – 2017-03-30
Susanne Kennedy, *Women in Trouble* – Volksbühne Berlin – 2017-11-30
Susanne Kennedy and Markus Selg, *Coming Society* – Volksbühne Berlin – 2019-01-17
Susanne Kennedy after Anton Chekhov, *Drei Schwestern* – Münchner Kammerspiele –
   2019-04-27
Susanne Kennedy and Markus Selg, *Ultraworld* – Volksbühne Berlin – 2020-01-16
Susanne Kennedy and Markus Selg, *Oracle* – Münchner Kammerspiele – 2020-06-15
Susanne Kennedy, Markus Selg, Rodrik Biersteker, *I AM (VR)* – Ultraworld Productions
   – 2021-02-17
Susanne Kennedy and Markus Selg, *Jessica, an Incarnation* – Volksbühne Berlin –
   2022-02-24
Philip Glass and Robert Wilson, *Einstein on the Beach* – Theater Basel – 2022-06-04
Susanne Kennedy and Markus Selg, *Angela (a strange loop)* – Ultraworld Produc-
   tions / Kunstenfestivaldesarts et al. – 2023-05-11