

Dematerialised Political and Theatrical Legacies: Rethinking the Roots and Influences of Tim Crouch's Work

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Abstract

This article reassesses the legacies of both theatre and conceptual art in Tim Crouch's practice, and suggests re-routing the reception of his work towards a more balanced and politicised understanding of his influences, trajectory and current dramaturgy. The article first reflects on the prevalent account of Crouch's engagement with theatre, and problematises the claim that the language-based minimalism of his work authorises spectators to imaginatively co-create it. This section also outlines a complementary narrative about the relationship between theatre and Crouch's practice. This narrative draws from a less restrictive view of the twentieth-century theatre tradition and from the theatre-maker's lesser known, politically-committed theatrical and pedagogical career. The article then moves on to examine the ideological and aesthetic affinity between Crouch's theatre and conceptual art, with particular reference to three plays that have been overtly aligned to this paradigm: *Shopping for Shoes* (2003), *My Arm* (2003) and *ENGLAND* (2007). Here, it is argued that conceptual art's ambiguous relationship with capitalism has been understated in the debate on Crouch's work. A thematic critique of conceptual art's potential for banality or exploitation is also unveiled in his plays. Moreover, the article questions the use of the term 'dematerialisation' with regards to Crouch's practice, and calls for a reconsideration of theatre ontology, and a politically-inflected revision of the role of materiality in his work. It concludes that conceptual art in particular and art in general offer Crouch suitable metaphors to question the ways in which some human lives become exploited, commodified or rendered immaterial to warrant the pleasure of others. It therefore recommends for a more nuanced understanding of Crouch's engagement with conceptual art, as well as sensitivity to his theatrical roots.

In the incipient debate on the work of British theatre maker Tim Crouch, two aspects have taken prominence. The first is the indebtedness of his plays to conceptual art. This legacy was originally recognised by Crouch in his 2006 online interview with Caridad Svich, examined subsequently in Stephen Bottoms's article 'Authorizing the Audience: The Conceptual Drama of Tim Crouch' (2009), and expanded in Emilie Morin's 'Look Again': Indeterminacy in Contemporary British Drama' (2011), where the influence of Fluxus artists is also considered*. The second aspect is Crouch's widely documented intention to promote spectators' imaginative, intellectual and ethical implication in the work.** These two questions have been portrayed as interconnected: his plays' minimalistic aesthetics and suggestive language have been seen as paramount in spurring the audiences' co-creative work and ethical engagement. 'By minimising staging apparatus', Bottoms has argued, 'Crouch opens up the possibility for audience members to make circumstantial interpretations of their own' ('Materialising' 448).

*Although the chronological and formal boundaries separating conceptual art from other artistic movements are blurred, the term refers to a heterogeneous practice in the visual arts that, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, problematised the received constitutive elements and attributes the artwork. With roots in Marcel Duchamp's readymades, conceptual artists such as Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, Terry Atkinson or Michael Baldwin challenged some of the received prerequisites of an artwork: evidence the artist's manual skill, originality, uniqueness, cohesion and marketable objecthood. Key to conceptual art is the reduction of the material elements of the artwork, and an increased emphasis on the viewer's integration of visual, textual and contextual elements for the completion or conceptual creation of the piece. Originating in the early 1960s, Fluxus is the name given to a loosely organised group of avant-garde artists, whose practice 'range[d] from minimal performances, called Events, to full-scale operas, and from graphics and boxed multiples called Fluxkits to paintings on canvas' (Higgins xiii). According to Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, the Fluxus enterprise loosely fulfilled nine criteria: 'internationalism, experimentalism, iconoclasm, intermedia, the resolution of the art/life dichotomy, implicativeness, play or gags, ephemerality and specificity' (qtd. in Smith 30). Influenced too by Duchamp, as well as by John Cage's concrete music, Fluxus artists included George Maciunas, George Brecht and Yoko Ono amongst others, and their activities extended until the 1970s.

**E.g. Bottoms, 'Authorizing', 'Materialising'; Freshwater; Frieze; Lane; Iiter 396; Morin 79. Crouch's interventions have also been crucial in positing spectatorial engagement as key to his dramaturgy, e.g. Crouch, In Conversation; 'Response'; Svich.

For Bottoms, this strategy responds to Crouch's 'concern to individualise spectatorial response – *to authorise his audience*' ('Materialising' 448; emphasis added). However, in the important task of mapping some of the influences of Crouch's work in the realm of conceptual art, the critical narrative to date has overlooked the aims and aesthetics of important twentieth-century theatre practices. Moreover, the political idiosyncrasy of both conceptual art and Crouch's theatre has been downplayed or subsumed exclusively to the economies of the artistic exchange. The resulting reading of Crouch's work risks appearing somewhat anti-theatrical, as well as relatively apolitical – a situation that, I would argue, is particularly striking given that questions of economic exploitation, collective responsibility, vulnerability and agency thematically and structurally underpin all of his work.

Taking this on board, the aim of this article is not so much to challenge the undeniable influence of conceptual art on Crouch's theatre-making, but to interrogate and enrich the existing critical narrative linking the two. To this end, I offer a reappraisal of a debate that has invoked claims about the artwork's authorisation of the audience, about its relationship with capitalism and about the ontology of theatre. By foregrounding Crouch's lesser known background in politicised theatre practices, this article also draws attention to the possible legacies that may have been omitted from the debate thus far. The article then highlights a thematic critique of conceptual art's potential banality, exploitative voyeurism, or self-involved obliviousness in *My Arm* (2003) and *ENGLAND* (2007) and reassesses the political significance of materiality in these works and in *Shopping for Shoes* (2003). These arguments indicate that the roots, influences and antecedents of Crouch's theatre cannot be contained solely within the realm of conceptual art and that the connection between his work and conceptual art is not simply one of programmatic or aesthetic affinity.

Revoking authorisations, invoking invisible legacies

Crouch's professed discomfort with some traditions of acting and theatre-making, alongside his fascination with conceptual art, have partly contributed to the critical dismissal of his full

theatrical background and antecedents. Crouch has consistently explained that his playwriting emerged from dismay with psychologically-based acting and the aesthetics of social realism, which in 2006 he considered to be ‘the dominant form of British theatre’ (qtd. Svich). According to Crouch, his training and early career as an actor brought him to perceive such ways of theatre-making as oversaturated, redundantly imitative and stultifying for the spectators (Crouch, *In Conversation*), as well as unsatisfactory and unsuccessful for himself as an actor (qtd. Hytner et al. 120). His work consequently developed from the will to challenge this type of theatre, and ‘to explore ways to authorize the spectator’s participation in the performance process’ (Bottoms, ‘Authorizing’ 67; ‘Materialising’ 448). Like conceptual art, Crouch’s practice is often described as relieving theatre from any duty to produce works that are fully and immediately apprehensible, and from having to host its audience through meaning (Lane 133); the authority of the writer, director or cast is allegedly lifted (Lane 133), ‘move[d] ... off the stage and into the auditorium’ (Ilter 396).

I have some misgivings with regards to how Crouch’s work has been framed in relation to theatre – particularly how theatre spectatorship, theatre histories, and Crouch’s own theatrical past have been portrayed in the scholarly debate. Firstly, Crouch’s orchestration of spectatorship has been posited as illustrative of Jacques Rancière’s theses in *The Emancipated Spectator* (e.g. Bottoms, ‘Materialising’ 448, 454; Ilter 397). Crouch’s concerns can indeed be related to the Rancièrian conviction that the spectator is always-already intellectually active – and perhaps the theatre maker’s familiarity with Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and *The Emancipated Spectator* is worthy of note (Crouch, Personal interview). Yet, as a matter of fact, the vocabulary utilised for expressing Crouch’s practice is decidedly anti-Rancièrian, insofar as it contravenes the understanding of equality that underpins the philosopher’s work on politics, art and education. Rancière’s definition of equality establishes that we are all already equal and that, therefore, equality can never be gained or bestowed on others – it can only be confirmed, verified (*Disagreement* 31-35; ‘Politics’ 60; *Ignorant* 45-73; *Politics* 52-53). When

discussing the theatrical event, Rancière argues for the equality of intelligences, capacities and activities of everyone involved in theatre making *and* spectating (*Emancipated* 12-14). Contrary to this, the suggestion that Crouch's work may 'authoriz[e] individual engagement' (Bottoms, 'Autorizing' 72) or 'liberat[e] the authority of the audience' (Crouch, qtd. Bottoms, 'Authorizing' 67) draws a clear hierarchical relationship between the artist/artwork and the audience, who in this case is given the exceptional permission to think and imaginatively participate in the work. Albeit expressed here in unselfish terms, this remnant of authorial authority presumes the very *a priori* unequal distribution of capacities between theatre-makers and spectators that Rancière critiques (*Emancipated* 12-14). In short, Rancière would say that the authorisation or liberation of the audience's authority is redundant.

Crouch's suspicion towards some forms of theatre-making and the alleged modes of spectatorship they foster is also deeply at odds with Rancière's propositions. 'If all the agency of transformation has been taken by the actor', Crouch explains in relation to illusionist theatre forms, 'then the process is complete, and the audience lose that transformative agency that they should have, and that they do have in other art forms and have less so in theatre' (Personal interview). Crouch's minimalist stage design, evocative language and resistance against impersonation are therefore presented as part of a devolutionary scheme, returning part of the creative work to the otherwise inactive spectators. This position, however, demonstrates a rather sceptical, if not anti-theatrical, stance towards the spectatorial activity normally allowed by the stage. As Rancière argues in *The Emancipated Spectator*, this is a recurrent narrative, whereby '[t]heater accuses itself of rendering spectators passive' and 'consequently assigns itself the mission of . . . restoring to spectators ownership of their consciousness and their activity' (7). Yet, contrary to the default equation of theatre spectatorship with passivity and ignorance, Rancière proposes that the spectator is always already an autonomous, intellectual agent in the theatre event (*Emancipated* 7-17). It is essential to emphasise here that Rancière does not argue for a shift in theatrical practices so as to promote or maximise the spectator's emancipation. In Rancière's

words, '[b]eing a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity' (*Emancipated* 17). Rather, *The Emancipated Spectator* argues against the equation of a theatre's audience with 'community, gaze and passivity, exteriority and separation' (7), and its opposition to theatrical performance as image, appearance, activity, self-ownership and knowledge (7). As Rancière notes, this prejudiced distribution of roles fails to acknowledge that audiences are always 'both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them' (13), 'plotting their own paths in the forest of things, acts and signs that confront or surround them' (16). If we consider, as Rancière does, that the spectator is already emancipated, then it follows that she is always actively co-creating and translating the theatre work – irrespective of the aesthetics of the piece.

In short, these early interpretations of Crouch's work are useful in expressing the theatre maker's refusal of exclusive ownership over the production and interpretation of meaning. However, the terminology mobilised by Crouch warrants critical distance for a consistent engagement with Rancière's theories. Arguably, the relationship between Crouch's work and the spectator might be better framed by taking into account both Rancière's vindication of an already emancipated spectator and what Claire Bishop contends, following Umberto Eco, about art in general –therefore including more conventionally staged performing arts: 'every work of art is potentially 'open' since it may produce an unlimited range of possible readings; it is simply the achievement of contemporary art, music and literature to have foregrounded this fact' ('Antagonism' 62).

A second problem with the portrayal of Crouch's plays as rejecting the legacy of theatre and embracing instead that of conceptual art is that this story forgets the remits and aesthetics of avant-garde, popular and political theatres. Like Crouch's work, these theatre forms have historically sought spectators' intellectual and/or physical participation, often resorting to minimal stagecraft and the abolition of the fourth wall. In fact, it is interesting to note that precisely those conceptual and Fluxus artists that are deemed influential in Crouch's theatrical practice locate themselves as inheritors of the theatrical experiments of the historical avant-garde, as well as other performative, non-

artistic forms. George Maciunas, who coined the label 'Fluxus' and coordinated the events of this group of artists between 1962 and 1978, illustrates these legacies in his *Diagram of Historical Development of Fluxus and Other 4 Dimensional* [sic], *Aural, Optic, Olfactory, Epithelial and Tactile Art Forms* (1973). Maciunas's chart connects the neo-Haiku events and chance operations of George Brecht, as well as John Cage's concretism, to Futurist variety theatre, Synthetic theatre and Total theatre. Beyond their genealogical relation to theatre, conceptual and Fluxus artworks can indeed be situated at the intersection between the visual and performative arts for their requirement of an audience to complete the piece.* There is no room here to index Crouch's possible theatrical antecedents in the twentieth century – theatre practices that disregard humanist characterisation and acting, use minimal or inexistent stage-designs, and aim to stimulate or provoke spectatorial intellectual and imaginative participation. However, Bertolt Brecht's and Peter Handke's work stand out as important aesthetic, and arguably political, references. In any case, these allusions to theatre history, and to the theatrical legacies and features of conceptual art and Fluxus work, indicate that Crouch's plays need to be inscribed in a much more intricate and theatrical genealogy than the framing of his work thus far would suggest.

Thirdly, in the attempt to see in Crouch's work a renewal of theatrical form through contact with conceptual art, part of the playwright's own political and theatrical history has been understated. Crouch's previous career as an actor is often cited as defining in his rejection of traditional theatre forms; it is rarely acknowledged that Crouch's early work also included his acting for the theatre group Public Parts, which the author has described as 'a very politically motivated theatre company' (In Conversation) and Dan Rebellato has labelled as socialist (126). Public Parts was co-founded by Crouch in 1985, and constituted as a cooperative which devised and toured work in the South West of England (Crouch, 'On Public Parts'). According to Crouch, the political allegiances of Public Parts were apparent in their 'performing in non-theatre venues, in places where

*In an acute observation of this overlap, Crouch has described Michael Craig-Martin's conceptual sculpture *An Oak Tree* (1973) as 'the most important theatre text' that he knows (qtd. Rebellato 133).

there was no theatre provision, making plays about the Workers' Theatre Movement, [and] making plays with explicit political themes' (In Conversation). Crouch left Public Parts in 1992, and it seems hardly coincidental that the company established in 2003 by Crouch, Karl James, a smith (Andy Smith) and Lisa Wolfe to help produce Crouch's work was named 'news from nowhere', like the 1890 utopian socialist novel by William Morris. Even outside of his theatre-making practice, Crouch has been deeply involved in teaching, and some ethical and political commitments can be seen to have permeated there too – for example, he led a week-long Conflict Resolution in Theatre course at the Gerard Bechar Theatre in Jerusalem in 2006 ('news from nowhere/Tim Crouch').

It would be simplistic to presume a direct relationship between Crouch's prior involvement in political theatre and his current theatre practice. Yet Crouch's roots in political theatre have been downplayed or ignored in scholarly accounts of his trajectory, which may have contributed to a somewhat formalist appraisal of his plays since *My Arm*. In fact, he has occasionally described his present work as politically inflected, albeit 'not in terms of party politics, but in terms of the public, the people, of giving a different model of being together that . . . acknowledges more than those other plays [produced with Public Parts] how we are together, and what we mean to each other when we are together' (In Conversation). Supplementing Crouch's own reading of the political aspects of his current theatre practice, I would argue that his work has shifted from a more traditional embrace of leftist political theatre, its sites, topics and audiences with Public Parts, to a more universalist approach in his practice after 2003. To put it differently, the political gestures in the structure, themes and aesthetics of his current work may not be hinged to identity politics, but nonetheless raise generic and crucial political questions that are capable of traversing any struggle. As my examination of *Shopping for Shoes* (2003), *My Arm* (2003) and *ENGLAND* (2007) below suggests, collective responsibility for the commodification and exploitation of others, and the fabrication and disruption of consensus are among these political preoccupations.

Theatrical readymades and dematerialisations

Bringing to the foreground these absent theatrical and political frames in the contextualisation of Crouch's work does not deny the importance of conceptual art in Crouch's practice; however, the debate on this legacy needs critical reappraisal. Crouch's interest in evincing and stimulating the status of spectators as co-creators of the theatre piece by way of combining suggestive language, minimal stagecraft, and non-representational performance can indeed be related to the concerns and strategies of conceptual art as it emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Artists such as Sol LeWitt and Michael Craig-Martin also privileged the cognitive processes involved in making and viewing art, foregrounding audience participation and (partially) dematerialising the artwork. In the words of LeWitt, '[i]deas can be works of art' yet '[a]ll ideas need not be made physical' (qtd. Goldia and Schellekens 56). These principles reverberate theatrically in all of Crouch's plays, which have also been described as conceptual and deploying dematerialising strategies (Bottoms, 'Authorizing' 75; 'Materialising' 449; Morin 82).

In 'Authorizing the Audience: The Conceptual Drama of Tim Crouch', Bottoms traces the genesis of Crouch's first play for adults back to the Duchampian 'readymade' (73). The suggestion here is that Crouch aligns himself with conceptual artists who 'select[ed] material or experience for aesthetic consideration rather than forming something from the traditional materials of art' (Carlson 111). By transposing these artists' premises to the theatre event, Crouch's pieces present ordinary items on the assumption that the spectators will produce layers of fictionality, meaning and aesthetic value when given the smallest material and/or linguistic cues. Such readymades feature in his first play for young audiences, *Shopping for Shoes* (2003), which sees Crouch alone on the stage manipulating a number of trainers and sandals, which stand for the characters that he ventriloquizes. Performed exclusively by Crouch, his first play for adults, *My Arm* (2003), also contains ordinary objects donated by the audience, which are invited to be perceived as characters. Consolidating a reading of his work vis-à-vis conceptual art, Crouch has often used the term 'dematerialisation' as one that suitably describes his aims and aesthetics with regards to spectatorial engagement.

One of the most recent examples is his 2012 performance-lecture *What The Eye Doesn't See: Representation and Figuration in Theatre*, which was described in the promotional poster as 'some thoughts about a de-materialised practice'. In reference to his third play for adults, *ENGLAND* (2007), Crouch has explained that the performance 'dematerialises' a year, a heart transplant operation, the murder of a supposed donor, about which the author remarks: 'It's not there, I don't act it' (Personal interview).

The creation of hermeneutic links between conceptual art and Crouch's practice has also offered cues to read his work in a political light – albeit tentatively and often in relation to the specific politics of the artistic exchange. First used by Lucy Lippard in her 1973 book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, 'dematerialisation' not only refers to 'a deemphasis on material aspects (uniqueness, permanence, decorative attractiveness)' (5) that conceptual artists placed on their work. This strategy was also very much aligned with their purported wish to remove art from the logic of an all-encompassing commodification that was deemed to fuel and be fuelled by capitalism. By 'removing material definition', Crouch has similarly explained, a play becomes an open piece that is 'not owned by the actor and the production team', but by the spectator, who allegedly completes the play with their own imagination and ideas (Personal interview). Bottoms has complemented this view reporting that, for Crouch, theatre 'functions as a 'return of the repressed'' in the arts' unconscious: because of its impermanent nature, theatre has the potential to resuscitate the 'betrayed promise' of conceptual art of becoming uncommodifiable ('Authorizing' 75). Morin's analysis of *ENGLAND* has suggested a further politically significant link between Crouch's work and conceptual art. Like these artists, Morin contends, Crouch is concerned with art's relationship to late capitalism and commodification (73), and the aesthetics of his work are attuned to our age of immaterial labour (73). However, Morin quickly abandons this promising line of argumentation with claims that 'attempting to ascribe clear political intentions to the play [*ENGLAND*] is self-defeating . . . since its concern with the workings of late capitalism is

subsumed under a relentless interrogation of . . . performance’, ‘an interrogation of the relation between theatre and conceptual art’ (76).

Theatre ontology and materialism

This narrative about the aesthetic and political legacies of conceptual art in Crouch’s practice is problematic in at least three counts, which this final section will explore. I will begin with the suggestion that theatre can revisit and fulfil the promise of conceptual art of sidestepping commodification and consumption and, with them, capitalism. In the case of conceptual art, such promise was never completely sincere. In *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (2003), Alexander Alberro argues that the claim that conceptual art attempted to ‘eliminate the commodity status of the art object . . . is mythical’, as these artists sought and indeed found ways of marketing their work (4). For Alberro, the movement’s ‘egalitarian pursuit of publicness and the emancipation from traditional forms of artistic value were as definitive as the fusion of the artwork with advertising and display’ (5), a situation that complicates the existing framing of Crouch’s work. Moreover, theatre’s ephemerality and purported inability to accrue value do not comprise all the ways in which theatre can and does participate in the logic of capitalism. Even putting to one side questions of ticketing, funding, programming and differential access to the arts, examples of the symbolic entanglement between theatre and capitalism abound. As *ENGLAND* cleverly intimates, living in aesthetic enchantment with the world *qua* ready-made art object may be a contributing factor in our obliviousness to the injustices we performatively sustain.

Second, the notion of ‘dematerialisation’ firmly places Crouch’s work in contact with conceptual art, but the label is a misleading descriptor – even for the art form it originally sought to define.* ‘Dematerialisation’ implies that Crouch’s performances

*In the preface to the 1997 edition of *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Lucy Lippard has retrospectively acknowledged the inaccuracy of the term ‘dematerialisation’, insofar as ‘a piece of paper or a photograph is as much an object, or as ‘material’, as a ton of lead’ (5).

evacuate the theatrical event from its material substance, or that materiality plays a secondary role over the ideas enticed by the work or offered by the spectators. However, what is often described as an effect of dematerialisation is actually a repudiation of the aesthetic foundations of representational theatre-making, foundations that are both material *and* immaterial. More specifically, what is ‘not materialised’ in Crouch’s performances is the mimetic representation of a story, the impersonation of individuated characters by the actors, illusionist stage designs, and the symbolic erasure of the audience behind the fourth wall. Rather than ‘dematerialised’, the pared down aesthetics of Crouch’s theatre pieces might therefore be best described as non-representational, meta-theatrical and post-Brechtian.

In fact, matter and materialism play a huge role in Crouch’s dramaturgy and its politics – particularly with regards to how his work presents a critique of materialistic forms of understanding and dealing with human beings and how it also ethically renegotiates the notions of subjectivity and intersubjective relations. Re-examining *Shopping for Shoes* and *My Arm* in this light can help a reading of Crouch’s work beyond the identification of the readymades it contains. In *Shopping for Shoes*, the trainers and sandals manipulated by Crouch literally illustrate the confusion of commodities with identity, the capitalist synecdoche that takes a subject’s possessions as the subject as a whole. The capitalist alignment of consumption with self-expression is synthetically summarised in the play’s own narration of the encounter between its two protagonists, Siobhan and Shaun: ‘Shaun tells her about his shoes. About belonging to a tribe, about being an individual, about feeling special, about being cool. . . . About how every shoe in his collection expresses a different bit of him. Every brand says something. . . . It’s about your identity. It’s about who you are’ (70). Similarly, in *My Arm*, the random objects collected from the audience and that stand in for the secondary characters in the play offer an image of the extreme reification and utilitarian manipulation of humanity that art can inflict on its subjects, as is the case with the protagonist.

Thirdly and finally, despite the obvious aesthetic and ideological affinities between Crouch’s work and conceptual art, it is important to note that his plays also thematically

critique certain artistic practices and the aesthetic disposition that conceptual art in particular requires. *My Arm* follows the consequences of what is described as a ‘thought-less’ (14) gesture of a child who one day raises his arm for good and eventually becomes the precious subject/object/abject of an avid British conceptual artist and an American art dealer. The protagonist is posed here as the paradoxically thought-less, *concept-less*, piece of conceptual art. Whilst allegedly embracing the principles of conceptual art, *My Arm* also reflects on art’s potential fascination with the grotesque, its capitalisation of pain, its ability to generate grandiose narratives from a vacuum, and its solipsistic and self-aggrandising use: ‘Don’t think that this gesture is about belief’, the protagonist confesses early in the play,

It isn’t for a moment about belief, or conviction or integrity. I’d like to be able to tell you that this all sprung out of some sort of social protest. That it was incensed by the stories from Cambodia. . . . I think it was none of these. If anything it was formed out of the absence of belief. I think at some point I was struck by the realisation that I had nothing to think about. I was thoughtless. I couldn’t cause thought. I was not the effect of thought. (14)

References to conceptual art are also present in *ENGLAND*, a play for art galleries with multiple nods to work of the Young British Artists, and the abstraction of Willem de Kooning. *ENGLAND* also intertwines themes of aesthetic sensibility with elitism, exploitation, consumerism and the perpetuation of global injustice. In this site-generic play for art galleries, the two performers – Tim Crouch and Hannah Ringham in the original production – take turns to present a joint, first person singular narrative about how a heart condition threatens the life of the English protagonist. Alongside this narrative, audiences are constantly requested to equate the world as a readymade work of art. They are asked to appreciate the aesthetic value of the body in itself, the beauty of how it interacts with objects and space. They are commanded to pay attention to the quality of the protagonist’s boyfriend’s soft skin, and to marvel at the physical changes that illness brings to the body of the protagonist. Buildings, paintings, cashmere

jumpers are all subject to the command of being observed as works of art. Framed by the real space of the art gallery, the play suggests that the living body can be apprehended as art if we are able to look at it with an aesthetic disposition. ‘All this is art. This is how we look’ (28), says the protagonist. This abolition of the distinction between life and art – a throwback to Fluxus, conceptual art and the avant-garde – would initially appear as innocuous, if not quite democratic. It would seem that our aesthetic inclination may find art everywhere, that this aesthetic disposition can promise an enchanted existence for all. However, the play strongly makes the case for art being a commodity, and a very gainful one: ‘Good art is art that sells!’ Yet, if any subject can be apprehended as an art object, and art is a commodity, it follows that the subject can therefore be commodified too, priced and traded – as we learn has been the case with the Eastern citizen called Hassam in Act Two, whose heart was sold in dubious circumstances to guarantee the life of the protagonist. The enchanted existence of the privileged protagonist, keen on finding pleasure and beauty both in the everyday and in the extraordinariness of art, is therefore posed as intricately linked with the market. The repeated instructions to not touch the artwork, or indeed to not touch anything, suggest that this aesthetically sensitive gaze is accompanied by a lack of real contact with the world.

Conclusion: materialising the political gestures in Crouch’s work

There are obvious connections between Crouch’s plays and conceptual art, regarding the not-necessarily-material ontology of the artwork, the importance of concepts and ideas involved in the production and reception of art, the use of everyday materials, and the overt emphasis on the active role of spectators. However, the structural inequalities of globalised capitalism, the confounding of consumption with individual particularity, and the injustice of consensus, to name but a few of the political concerns of his work, have been the blind spots of the debate thus far. Sensitivity to Crouch’s theatrical roots, and a more nuanced engagement with conceptual art and theatre histories, can provide less formalist methodologies and contribute to flesh

out the political gestures in his work that have been rendered immaterial.

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