

Holding Clouds is Futile

Attending performance from the Buddhist perspective of

Bardo: an exercise for times of transition.

Master's Thesis | Contemporary Theatre, Dance and Dramaturgy

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Abstract

In this thesis, two distinct fields of study and practice, namely Tibetan Buddhism and contemporary performance are coupled. This demonstrates how they can jointly answer the questions whether and how contemporary theatre may be a training ground to exercise (an alternative) way of being with (periods of) transition. Buddhism proves to be a useful perspective to answer these questions as it has a strong focus on impermanence as a study object as well as practices which can be done to prepare for periods of change and transition. The Tibetan term *bardo*, stems from the traditional compilation of texts called *The Bardo Thödol Chenmo*. It is used as a reference point to create a systematic lens to look at performances' potentiality to induce experiences of transition and invite for a specific attitude towards them. *Bardo* is, traditionally understood as a liminal state between death and rebirth, but also conceived as any transitional period one can be in. To use *bardo* as a perspective on performance I divided the concept into two 'expressions' of its meaning: *bardo-as-continuous-transition* and *bardo-as-an-intermediate-modality-of-existence*. The perspective is based on the similarities I argue for in Chapter 1, between experiencing an immersive performance and practicing *visualization meditation*, a practice done in preparation for *bardo*. *Attentiveness* and a *nongrasping attitude* are added to the perspective, as these are, according to Buddhism, attitudes which one should have in a period of transition. Two case studies, *Curve*, by Schweigman& and Het Houten Huis and *Continuum* by Johannes Bellinkx, are analyzed in how they immerse their audience into a *bardo* experience and how they invite *attentiveness* and *nongrasping*. The outcomes of this analysis show ways in which performance has the possibility to be a place in which spectators can prepare themselves for future transitions.

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Introduction

Our world is in transition. Many recent interlinked crises show that the world we live in does not have a stable ground. Different global and national events are showing an unfolding slip away from democracy, such as the storming of the United States Capitol Building and devaluation of democratic rights in Hungary and other Eastern European countries (among other events). Also, if we don't change our ways of living, our planet will be heading to extinction¹ and on top of all that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused tremendous shifts in how we live on a global, national, and personal level. You could say that change and uncertainty are always present, but what is troublesome in this time is that we, as a Western society, are not equipped (anymore) to cope with the feelings and disorientation which come with it. Our ways of coping when the rug is pulled out from under our feet are random. Most of us do not have a religion, an idealism, or rituals to latch onto in times of instability. To illustrate: a study by *Pew Research Center* shows that in Western European countries 24 % of the people is religiously unaffiliated and 46 % of the people is a non-practicing Christian.² And a research by Radboud University states that 75 percent of Dutch do not count themselves spiritual. This is also reflected in education: a report of *VOS/ABB*, the association of public schooling in the Netherlands showed that 12,5 % of primary schools does give some sort of rreligious-or ideological education.³ So dealing with feelings of groundlessness and insecurity is not part of our schooling. This can be considered strange, knowing the only thing we can be certain of in life is that we will face uncertainty, change and, eventually, death. Knowing how to deal with the natural law of flux might be much more productive than learning how to achieve security by building a solid career, buying a house, having a marriage or any other (impermanent) thing we use for building an assured future.

¹ C. Mora, D. Spirandelli, E.C. Franklin, *et al.* "Broad threat to humanity from cumulative climate hazards intensified by greenhouse gas emissions." *Nature Clim Change* 8, 1062–1071 (2018).

² "Being Christian in Western Europe," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, last modified 29 May, 2018, <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>.

³ Angelique Hofman, "Levensbeschouwelijk onderwijs in het openbaar onderwijs, aanbeveling voor VOS/ABB – Vereniging voor openbare en algemeen toegankelijke scholen," Recommendation Report for VOS/ABB (2017).

In Buddhism, impermanence is seen as one out of three distinctive features of existence, an undeniable fact of life and therefore a central theme in the religion.⁴ The dilemma Buddha poses, of trying to find a lasting base of security in a life where everything keeps changing, has always inspired me into introspection and at the same time filled me with a sense of sadness, ambiguity, and insecurity. Why do I seem to, counterproductively, intensify my grip on things when I see them change or end? Is another way of attending impermanence possible? After having seen certain performances, I have had the same introspective feeling as Buddha's dilemma gives me. It makes me wonder if performance can be a place for learning to attend impermanence and transition in life. Can performance be a place to exercise being in periods of impermanence and transition to its audience? This is the central theme of this research.

To systematically focus on these ponderings this research brings in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as a lens to look at performances.⁵ Firstly, because it provides the idea of *bardo*, which describes situations or periods of transition and impermanence in detail and explains ways to prepare for it. *Bardo* is a *gap* between the completion of one situation and the onset of another. When someone is in a *bardo*, transition can become experienced with a heightened sense of awareness. The process of *dying* is an example of *bardo*: one is transiting from *life* to *death*, and the experience of impermanence is intensified. But *bardo* can also be experienced in life. The transition from being awake to being asleep for example is a period in which one's consciousness is changing, not yet dreaming, but not awake anymore.

Tibetan Buddhists prepare for *bardo* periods by studying and meditating. Even though transition periods can be coupled with feelings of unease and discomfort, Tibetan Buddhists do not see *bardos* as a negative thing. On the contrary, they are events in "which the possibility of awakening is particularly present" and they can therefore be used to become a wiser being.⁶ The process of training for *bardo* periods is guided by the compilation of texts called *The Bardo Thödol Chenmo*, which was translated in

⁴ Sam van Schaik, *The Spirit of Tibetan Buddhism* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2016), 51.

⁵ According to Sam van Schaik (footnote 5, page 1-4) *Tibetan Buddhism* is a western word for a type of Buddhism which originated from the latest stages of Indian Mahayana Buddhism.

⁶ Sogyal Rinpoche and Patrick Gaffney, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (London: Ebury Publishing, 1992), 199.

1927 as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.⁷ The fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, observes the universality of preparing for future experiences important in Buddhism. He notes: “Normally in our lives, if we know that we are going to be confronted by a difficult or unfamiliar situation, we prepare and train ourselves for such a circumstance in advance, so that when this event actually happens, we are fully prepared”.⁸ The supposition of the significance and possibility of exercising our way of being with transitions (*bardos*) for the future is taken up in this research.

There are several reasons to propose *bardo* as a helpful lens to look at performances’ possibility to engender new ways of relating to impermanence. First, the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo* is filled with imaginations and descriptions of experiences of *bardo*, sometimes called *bardo realms*. Meditation practices preparing for *bardo* are based on visualization of these *realms*. John Powers in his *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* notes that the goal of these is to internally induce an experience of something in actuality, as if it is really happening (*visualization*) and by doing that familiarize oneself with something or restructure one’s perception of it (*meditation*).⁹ These meditations are done with a sense of attentiveness to process. The composition of worlds in meditation encapsulates an easy step towards relating to performance composition, a medium in which worlds, fictive or existing are composed. Elinor Fuchs, for example, in her text ‘EF’s Visit to a Small Planet’ proposes to see performances as ‘small planets’, which operate according to their own logic.¹⁰ Because the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo* is detailed in describing environments of *bardo* and feelings and experiences these will evoke in someone it could be seen as a dramaturgical analysis of what Tibetan Buddhism expects a *bardo*, such as a dying process, to be.¹¹ This includes the dying person's experiences, which could be related to *spectatorship*, and what one is expected to encounter while dying (in terms of visions) which would then relate to *composition*. Furthermore, since the rise of performance studies in the ‘60s and ‘70s and its influence on performance art, performance art has gained interrelations to Buddhism. David George in *Buddhism as/in*

⁷ Casey Alexandra Kemp, “Tibetan Book of the Dead (Bardo Thödol),” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (August 2016). 1.

⁸ Karma-glin-pa, Graham Coleman, Thupten Jinpa, Padmasambhava and Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States* (London: Penguin, 2008), 26.

⁹ John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), 82.

¹⁰ Elinor Fuchs, "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play," *Theater* 34, no. 2 (2004): 4-9.

¹¹ In the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo* a variety of esoteric images are described. These images consist of different Buddha figures, landscapes and objects symbolizing different qualities etc. These are left unspoken of in this thesis because they are not necessary to explain the main argument.

performance: Analysis of Meditation and Theatrical Practice, describes how every meditation is a “translation of the topic into a praxis, a performance”.¹² Performance studies, according to Shepherd and Wallis, is about “behaviours designed to make something happen, to perform a function”.¹³ It analyses (any) performance with “emphasis upon the phenomenal experience of performer, performance event and audience”.¹⁴ George observes Buddhism as a “philosophical system which, early on, exposed the distorting mediation of language and argued for reestablishment of the primacy of experience -- the personal, direct, immediate act of knowing”.¹⁵ The focus of performance on process, presence and primary experience is one of the reasons for George to find performance and Buddhist epistemology mutually illustrating.¹⁶ George observes performance and Buddhism sharing understandings about how knowledge is created. This, together with the way *bardo* realms are described, makes me curious if the two paradigms could, together, shed light on how contemporary performance can be a training ground to come to terms and live with the fundamental transition everything is always in. This research elaborates further on this curiosity by bringing *bardo* in relation to contemporary performance, resulting in the following research question: **How can contemporary performances function as preparatory practices for times of transition and how can this be understood from the perspective of the Tibetan Buddhist term bardo?** This question will be subdivided into three sub questions:

1. In which ways does *bardo* and the philosophy behind it relate to periods of transition and impermanence and how is the notion of preparing for these periods implicated in it?
2. How can *bardo* serve as a perspective for understanding performance as a preparatory practice for future transition?
3. In what way are the performances *Curve* and *Continuum*, seen from the perspective of *bardo*, preparatory practices for times of transition?

¹² David George, *Buddhism as/in Performance: Analysis of Meditation and Theatrical Practice* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1999), 56.

¹³ Simon Shepherd, and Mick Wallis. *Drama/Theatre/Performance*. (London: Routledge, 2004), 117.

¹⁴ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), 103.

¹⁵ George, *Buddhism as/in Performance: Analysis of Meditation and Theatrical Practice*, 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 35.

Theoretical framework

The term *bardo*, with its notions of ‘gap’ and ‘in between state’ evokes associations with *liminality*, a concept which is widely discussed in relation to performance studies, in which the idea of performance was broadened to areas outside of the theatre. Where in dramatic theatre, mimesis and imagination provide a form of transcendence, in performance studies this is sought more in the domain of liminality. Susan Broadhurst writes in *Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory*: “The term liminal refers to a marginalized space of fertile chaos and creative potential where nothing is fixed or certain.” The term liminality comes from ritual studies and was developed by Arnold van Gennep and later picked up by Victor Turner.¹⁷ McKenzie, quoted by Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis in *Drama/Theatre/Performance* argues “While Turner attends to both the normative and transformational functions of liminality in traditional societies, Performance Studies selectively shaped itself around the transformational potential of performance as a liminal activity”.¹⁸ Erika Fischer Lichte describes the specificity of liminality in performance in more detail in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance* with emphasis on how this liminality *transforms* the experiencing subject (performer or audience) and brings it into a state of “betwixt and between”.¹⁹

Liminality as a concept could shed light on the phenomenon and context in which this thesis is placed: finding new ways to deal with transition and change in a performance context. However, I find the Buddhist context and the implications *bardo* brings timelier and more suitable. Liminality most often seems to connect to a transition from a to b, with a focus on transforming into b, whereas my interest is related to learning how to deal with experiences of reference-lessness and indefinity caused by a period of transition. With *liminality* coming from a ritualistic background, the concept relates to *transcendence* and going beyond the ordinary. Buddhist practice has a less transcendental approach, focusing more on finding out what the underlying structure and nature of phenomena is and trying to live in accordance with that. According to Buddhism the nature of all phenomena is *multiple, interdependent, and*

¹⁷ Shepherd, and Wallis. *Drama/Theatre/Performance*. 110.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2008), 174.

impermanent.²⁰ However, as sentient beings we seem to experience reality often in a more solid way: phenomena appear to us as *singular, independent, and lasting*. This false imputation on phenomena is what is the cause of suffering, according to Buddhism.²¹ A goal, for a Buddhist, is then to train oneself with meditation and contemplation to perceive and habituate oneself to act in accordance with the world's multiplicity, interdependence, and impermanence. So even though *bardo* does show some similarities with *liminality* it has a whole context of exercising living and behaving with the idea of *impermanence* and *transition* relevant for this research. Therefore, I find *bardo* a useful perspective to look at performances as training ground for transition, rather than *liminality*, which does not have this specific focus and context.

This research is not alone in seeing intersections in performance and Buddhism. Ellen Pearlman in *Nothing and Everything, The Influence of Buddhism on the American Avant Garde: 1942 – 1962* traces the spread of Buddhist thought into performance art halfway through the 20th century. Buddhism offered artists an approach emphasizing “silence, contemplation, spontaneity, and streams of consciousness” she observes.²² On the side of art practice, artists like John Cage, Meredith Monk and Ann Hamilton (among others) practiced and studied with Buddhist masters coming from Asia to the West.²³ Buddhism inspiring artists continues throughout recent times. For example, in the Netherlands Boogaerdt/VanderSchoot worked with the Buddhist concept of emptiness and performance collective Umland with *4 noble truths in 49 slides* (2015).²⁴ ²⁵ Umlands performance title directly references Buddhist philosophy.

In academic writing the intersection is looked at on a less practice-based level, focusing on what the performance medium is and how this relates to Buddhism. Often these writings relate to performance making, performer training and contemplative education. For example, Daniel Plà in ‘Mindfulness,

²⁰ Andy Karr, *Contemplating Reality: A Practitioner's Guide to the View in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2007), 32 – 40.

²¹ Powers. *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*. 71.

²² Ellen Pearlman, *Nothing and Everything - The Influence of Buddhism on the American Avant Garde: 1942 – 1962* (North Atlantic Books, 2012), 12.

²³ Pema Clark, “Self and No Self: Buddhism as Pedagogy in Contemporary Performance Art,” (Phd Diss., University of East Anglia, 2016), 34.

²⁴ Boogaerdt/van der Schoot, “Het Poreuze Ik,” *Theater Rotterdam Seizoensgids*, (2018-2019), 20-21.

²⁵ “URLAND presents: 4 noble truths in 49 slides,” URLAND website, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://urland.nl/project/urland-presents-4-noble-truths-in-49-slides/#documentation>

Meditation and Dharma Art: Clues for the Pedagogy of the Actor’, raises a question about a “possible relationship between the presence observed in meditation practitioners and that of actors”.²⁶ The focus of the *Journal of Performance & Mindfulness* also shows this primary focus with their last issue’s theme ‘improvisation’ and articles such as ‘Contemplating Arts Education’.²⁷ Relating Buddhist thought to the experiences of spectators and the performance composition itself is a more uncommon topic. This research is trying to fill this gap.

I have found two other authors who share this focus. David George with *Buddhism as/in Performance* looks at performance and Buddhist philosophy and practice and argues for their similarity in goal and method.²⁸ He does a qualitative analysis of theatrical practices within the Buddhist cultural tradition to exemplify this. Silvia Battista does something similar in the chapter ‘Vipassana Meditation as an Introspective Theatre: CAT by Ansuman Biswas’ from her book *Posthuman Spiritualities in Contemporary Performance*.²⁹ Battista analyses Vipassana meditation as a performance action (with the thesis that it is a performance action) and looks into its operation in relation to spirituality, performativity and spectatorship. With that she argues that *CAT* by Ansuman Biswas is an introspective performance informed by a kind of spectatorship which vipassana meditation generates. Both authors focus mainly on meditations themselves, using a performance paradigm as a lens to look at Buddhist meditative practices. My research is in line with theirs but does the reverse. It uses a Buddhist lens to look at performance practices which exist outside of a Buddhist context. With this I am adding to the discourse on how the Buddhist paradigm is related and relevant to performance composition and attendance.

Methodology

To create a perspective to systematically look at performances I have chosen to describe two separate expressions of the term *bardo*, which are inherently related. They are: *bardo-as-continuous-transition*,

²⁶ Daniel Plà, “Mindfulness, Meditation and Dharma Art: Clues for the Pedagogy of the Actor,” *Performance and Mindfulness* 2, no. 1 (2019).

²⁷ Daniel Pla, and L. Worley, (2021) “Contemplating Arts Education,” *Performance and Mindfulness* 4, no. 2 (2021).

²⁸ George, *Buddhism as/in Performance: Analysis of Meditation and Theatrical Practice*. 59.

²⁹ Silvia Battista, *Posthuman Spiritualities in Contemporary Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 99–137.

pointing towards the continuous transition of mind and matter. And *bardo-as-intermediate-modality-of-existence*, pointing towards specific periods in which transition is (hyper) experienced. These expressions are not separated in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy itself, but I have taken the freedom to articulate them to be able to apply the content on the case studies. I allowed myself this freedom because of my 15 years of experience in studying and practicing Tibetan Buddhism in the West and East, thereby having an inside perspective. The two expressions of *bardo* will be further explained in Chapter 1. To prepare for transition, Tibetan Buddhists visualize the worlds which are described as *bardo* modalities in their minds, this was described before and will also be elaborated upon in Chapter 1. Being in these imaginative worlds they also practice an attitude which is according to Buddhist philosophy in accordance with flux: a *nongrasping attitude of mind*. Together with *attentiveness*, a prerequisite for any meditation, this *nongrasping* attitude will be added to the perspective which is articulated in Chapter 1 and later used to look at performances.

These concepts are established with the use of several sources. Some are Buddhist scriptures translated from Tibetan into English, primarily *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*, translated from Tibetan to English by Gyurme Dorje. Others are academic sources by (western) Tibetologists and Asian religions studies scholars such as *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead* by Francesca Fremantle, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* by John Powers, the article ‘Tibetan Book of the Dead (Bardo Thödol)’ by Casey Kemp. I also used secondary literature, non-academic books by Tibetan Buddhist lama’s teaching in the west. They are used to translate the Asian cultural context to the western context: the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche and Patrick Gaffney, *The Bardo Guidebook* by Chogyi N. Rinpoche and *Living and Dying* by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche. These are all sources coming out of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, mainly coming from two different ‘schools’ in Tibetan, the Nyingma and Kagyu.³⁰ Without the primary Buddhist literature it is difficult to get a real authentic image of the scope

³⁰ Tibetan Buddhist tradition consists of four major schools of thought: Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug. The Nyingma school is the most ancient and the source of the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo*, which however is studied and interpreted in all four schools.

and meaning of the religion and without the western writers it would be difficult to translate the authentic image into a thesis applied to performance. Therefore, I have chosen to include these different sources.

In Chapter 2 and 3 I look through the lens which *bardo* provides at two performances: *Continuum* (2020) by Johannes Bellinkx and *Curve* (2015) by Schweigman&. The chapters are based on registrations, personal experience and audience feedback which was provided by Bellinkx and Schweigman. *Continuum* and *Curve* will be brought in relation to *bardo-as-continuous-transition* and *bardo-as-intermediate-modality-of-existence*, *attentiveness*, and *a nongrasping attitude of mind*. Both case studies work with altering the sensory perception of the spectator by cutting off senses or distorting them. This is how one starts to see the world differently and feels disoriented, like in a *bardo* process. The two performance worlds are not representing another world but continue upon the perception of the spectator's daily reality, becoming a practice grounded in that reality. A heightened sense of the spectator's own physical presence results from the auditorium, stage and the outside world being in the same world, the different 'overwhelming' sensory impulses present and the absence of another body - of a performer. This spectatorial address makes the performance *about* the spectator's experience, instead of something abstract or about someone else's experience, making the preparation personal. Both performances are different in their relation to the different expressions of *bardo*, with *Continuum* relating more to *bardo-as-continuous-transition* and *Curve* to *bardo-as-intermediate-modality-of-existence*.

Continuum (2020) by Johannes Bellinkx is an individual experience. One is separated from the other audience members by Bellinkx's set up; the audience is seated on a cart, its flank facing the direction of movement. One can only see what is presented through a small rectangular frame in front of one's eyes. What is presented as well as the spectator are moving, so that an experience of constant motion is created. *Curve* (2015) by Schweigman& and Het Houten Huis is a performance installation in which the spectator is individually undergoing a disorientating journey through a long inflatable tunnel. By walking to the pace of a metronome one slows down one's steps and is guided on *Curve*'s bewildering path. Starting and ending in the outside world, Schweigman& provides a smooth transition into and out of the performance world, thereby connecting the experience closely to daily reality.

In Chapter 4, I conclude this research with some final remarks on the outcomes engendered by looking at performances through a Buddhist perspective and a reflection on the implication of my choices. I also try to address some aspects and relations left untouched in this research but that are lingering somewhere to be acknowledged and thereby given existence. Maybe they will mobilize future research and ideas on the interactivity between the paradigms of performance studies and Buddhism.

Chapter 1: The perspective of bardo

The most important compilation of texts on *bardo* is the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo*. It is a guidebook studied and taken into practice by Tibetan Buddhists to prepare themselves for future transitions, especially the one during death. The text comprises detailed descriptions of sensory experiences someone is said to come across in the cycle of life and death. It also entails instructions on what kind of state of mind one needs to develop to not get confused in *bardo*. I'd like to see the text compilation as a map of a specific terrain, the *bardo*, as the described route to travel on that terrain as well as an advice on the recommended mindset during the route. It serves as a *Lonely Planet Guidebook*, describing the highlights, the dangers, the ways of traveling, the pitfalls, scams, the best way to behave and act towards locals etc. on a trip to a peculiar country or city. While reading the *Lonely Planet* at home one can already visualize the future place one will be visiting, and prepare oneself by learning about it and by gathering the materials needed at this place. At the destination itself, the book can guide one to have the best time possible there. So, like in the *Lonely Planet*, the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo* has a function before, as well as during dying specifically, and in other *bardos* – transition periods.

This chapter is structured from the idea that the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo* is a guidebook for *bardo*, and its essential and more universal meaning: transition states. The chapter will show what *bardo* is and what kind of attitudes of mind are said to be helpful to have when being in *bardo*. *Bardo* and these attitudes can then be understood as a lens to look at performance. First, *bardo* will be explained and a categorization of two expressions of *bardo* will be shown: *bardo-as-intermediate-modality-of-existence* and as *continuous transition*. Then *visualization meditation* will be explained as a training exercise for being with *bardo* by evoking experiences similar to it. After that *attentiveness* and *nongrasping* will be explained as attitudes of mind, which are helpful to have in *bardo*. These understandings will be used in Chapter 2 and 3 to analyse the case studies.

1.1 Bardo as an intermediate modality of existence and as continuous transition

Casey Kemp in her contribution to the ‘Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Religion’ describes *bardo* as the Tibetan term for the intermediate state between the moment of death and the moment of conception (into a new form of birth).³¹ Francesca Fremantle in *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead* notes that this understanding of *bardo* is thought of when mentioned without any other qualification.³² However, the term is often elaborated upon, universalizing or changing its meaning. According to Fremantle, its essence is in many texts and contexts described as “any transitional experience, any state that lies between two other states”.³³

In different texts there are different bardos enumerated and described. Some will follow to illustrate that *bardo* can be interpreted more broadly than the transition between death and rebirth. In the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo*, six bardos, six intermediate states are described, together they compose the whole cycle of birth and death, as articulated in Tibetan Buddhism.³⁴ The *six* bardos are: the state of being awake, the state of dream, the state of meditation, the state of dying, the state of after death and the state of becoming.³⁵ In another text on *bardo*, *The Mirror of Mindfulness* by Tsele Natsok Rangdrol the enumeration of *bardo* is in *four*, in which the first four of the six bardos (as above) are described as part of the *bardo* of this life.³⁶ Historically, the *bardo* between death and rebirth was articulated at first. Later, the other six (or four) bardos were articulated. After that, the essence of *bardo* started to be explained as *any transition period*.

Francesca Fremantle describes the various implications *bardo* can have in the following quote:

It is an interval, a hiatus, a gap. It can act as *a boundary that divides and separates*, marking the end of one thing and the beginning of another; but it can also be *a link between the two* -it can

³¹ Casey Alexandra Kemp, “Tibetan Book of the Dead (Bardo Thödol),” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (August 2016): 7.

³² Fremantle, *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 54.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Karma-glin-pa, et al, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*, 31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Chogyi Nyingma Rinpoche, *The Bardo Guidebook* (Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 1991), 33.

serve as a bridge or a meeting place that brings together and unites. It is a crossing, a stepping-stone, a transition. It is a crossroads where one must choose which path to take, and it is *a no-man's-land belonging to neither one side nor the other*.³⁷

Depending on how one looks at it, *bardo* can either be seen as a distinct modality of existence (with a specific type of consciousness) *separate* from other modalities, marked by an end and a beginning. Or it can be seen as a modality of existence that *links and bridges* separate modalities, being *intermediate* and showing a continuity. Bardos are called intermediate states because of these two facets: being a distinct modality of existence in itself, as well as a transition between the modality preceding a state and one following it; These two facets can also be found in the etymology of the word *bardo*. Sogyal Rinpoche and Patrick Gaffney write in their commentary on the *Bardö Thödol Chenmo*, called *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*: “*Bar* means “in between,” and *do* means “suspended” or “thrown”.³⁸ There’s a sense of suspension, of waiting, of reference-lessness in the *bardo* modality of existence, but at the same time there’s ‘in between’. In between what? In between other modalities of existences, with other modes of consciousness, linking them, providing a perspective of continuity.

This notion of continuity is also observed by Fremantle and described as essential to understanding *bardo*. She observes: “Wherever there is the death of one state of mind, there is the birth of another, and linking the two there is *bardo*. The past has gone, and the future has not yet come; we cannot catch that in-between moment, yet it is really all there is.”³⁹ Because we are always in between a future and a past state of mind, we are always in a *bardo*. So, *bardo* is *always* there, which means that we are *always in transition*. Thus, next to being a modality in itself, with a specific mode of consciousness (which will be elaborated upon) and being a link between the two separate modalities of existence preceding and following it, *bardo* also points towards an ever-present continuous transition made up by the flux of different modalities of existence.

³⁷ Fremantle, *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 54.

³⁸ Sogyal Rinpoche, et al, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, 116.

³⁹ Fremantle, *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 55.

To use *bardo* as a lens to look at performances, this thesis uses a systematic rendering of *bardo* in which the different implications of *bardo* are present. I will use two categories of understanding *bardo*: *bardo-as-intermediate-modality-of-existence* and *bardo-as-continuous-transition*. The first relates to *bardo* as a *modality of existence* in which one is suspended in between two other modalities: a past which was familiar and a future that is unknown. It relates to a period in which one experiences dissolution of the known, insecurity, and ambiguity. Examples of this category are moments or periods in life in which we can have a heightened sense of dissolution of a seemingly solid and lasting state. This can be for example, an unexpected ending of a relationship, or a loved one's sudden death. I would argue that we could also see the state of the world at the start of the corona pandemic and the following months as *bardo*. What seemed to be normal conditions and conventions suddenly started to shift and lose their solidity. *Bardo-as-intermediate-modality-of-existence* refers to moments or periods with a high intensity of emotions and impressions. *Bardo-as-intermediate-modality-of-existence* has a beginning and an end. This, and the cause of the disorientation, the dissolution of the familiar past and the insecurity about the present and what comes next, makes this modality of existence relate to past and future modalities of existence. Therefore, it is an *intermediate* state, linking past and future modalities, but at the same time it is distinct in its character.

The second category, *bardo-as-continuous-transition*, relates to the ever-presence of *bardo*, of transition and change. Living our day to day lives, we do not experience *bardo* as continuous transition consciously. We do not experience it if we do not deliberately focus on things showing it to us, like the seasons, or the various emotional states we go through during a day. *Bardo-as-continuous-change* underlies our reality and comes into our experiences when we focus on it or in moments of *bardo-as-intermediate-modality of existence*. Both categories, when experienced, point towards a hyper experience of change and transition. Both are characterized by an intensity of experiences: *bardo-as-continuous-transition* as a never stopping stream of evolving and changing phenomena; and *bardo-as-an-intermediate-modality-of-existence*, as a period with borders marking its separation between other modalities and at the same time linking them.

1.2 Visualization meditation: evoking experiences

The *Bardo Thödol Chenmo*, the guidebook for transition phases, proposes a type of meditation frequently used in Buddhism: *visualization meditation*. The text proposes this meditation indirectly, the method itself is not instructed in the text, however a studied reader knows which practices are meant by certain phrases.⁴⁰ John Powers notes in his *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*: the main goal of any *visualization meditation* is to internally induce an experience of something in actuality, as if it is really happening (*visualization*) and thereby familiarizing oneself with something or restructure one's ideas about it (*meditation*).⁴¹ This type of meditation is used in different traditions of Buddhism and on different levels on the path to enlightenment. Some are more elaborate, as the ones referred to in the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo*. They are part of the *Yoga Tantra* tradition of the previously mentioned *Nyingma* school of Tibetan Buddhism. To practice these meditations, one needs to have done elaborate training, have previous meditation experience and an initiation by a Buddhist teacher. Some are less elaborate and are practiced on all levels of the Buddhist path, such as compassion meditations. And the, also secularly used, *Loving Kindness* meditation in which one cultivates friendly wishes to sentient beings you know and do not know.⁴² Because *visualization meditation* is used on all levels, the description of it will be kept to its general method and not specify in detail the more esoteric *visualization meditations* used in the *Yoga Tantra* tradition.

The techniques described in the *Yoga Tantra* are elaborate and have two stages, Powers observes in his book.⁴³ The first stage involves imagination, and this is what will be focused on here. The second stage goes beyond visualizing and it would be inappropriate for someone with my level of understanding to articulate it. It is also not needed for this research to study this in depth. In the visualization stage, a meditator creates complex worlds in his mind, step by step, with buildings, inhabitants, sounds etc.

⁴⁰ According to *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche and Patrick Gaffney a big part of Tibetan Buddhist learning and study is based on oral instructions that a teacher transmits to a student. Without this context the book is hard to grasp. However, there are also different commentaries on the root texts written, such as the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo*, that cover these instructions. Still, the teacher and student exchange is very important in the tradition, in order to check if gained knowledge and insight is right.

⁴¹ Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, 82.

⁴² Beatrice Alba, "Loving-Kindness Meditation: A Field Study," *Contemporary Buddhism* 14, no. 2 (2013).

⁴³ Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, 283.

These worlds all represent different qualities connected to qualities of a Buddha. The notion of a Buddha simply means someone who is fully enlightened.⁴⁴ David George notes in his *Buddhism as/in Performance* that a text about such a visualization practice almost reads like a script for a play, with different characters, a set design, sounds etc., which the meditator himself directs and brings into being (with himself being part of it).⁴⁵ This idea is supported by Van Baar's description of the visualization process in *Boeddhisme in een notendop*, which is, he writes, supported with rituals involving hand movements, chanting (mantra's), visual diagrams, religious symbols, music, physical postures and material offerings.⁴⁶ A complete immersion into the world composed in the imagination is created and one practices faith in understanding that this world is indeed real.^{47 48}

An example of these more elaborated visualization practices can be found in the practice of *Taking Refuge* (Tib. *kyab dro*) as Powers notes in his book's section on Yoga Tantra.⁴⁹ This is a preliminary practice for the more elaborate visualization practices described in the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo* and a practice I have practiced over many years and have received oral teachings on, therefore I use it here as an example. To provide a (very) general explanation: in this meditation one visualizes a blooming tree, in the middle of a vast landscape. The tree is the most beautiful one you have ever seen and on it sit all kinds of different beings, including Buddhas representing different qualities of mind. One uses one's speech to (silently) say phrases and makes *prostrations*, which is a type of bowing in which you lay your whole body on the floor, in front of this tree. While doing this, one also visualizes oneself surrounded by all sentient beings doing the same. The idea is to commit to the qualities and practices the tree stands for by using the phrases, and the bowing with the intention provoked in your mind. You basically say: I will, from now on, do my utmost best to turn my mind and body to these

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ George, *Buddhism as/in Performance*, 59.

⁴⁶ Bert van Baar, *Boeddhisme in een Notendop* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 2009), 151.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ In Buddhism, the external world is never considered separate from the observer. Everything is, on a fundamental level, seen as a projection of mind.

⁴⁹ Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, 292.

positive qualities, to trust in them and to develop them, and I will not put my trust in something else (like outer circumstances) anymore.^{50 51}

Other practices which could be mentioned to get a better idea of what kind of visualization meditation is used in Tibetan Buddhism is *smoke offering*, in which one literally makes a fire and imagines the smoke full of offerings to all beings in the world to practice generosity.⁵² The creation (and accompanied visualization) of *sand mandalas* is another example, practicing letting go of fixation on temporary phenomena by creating a beautiful multicoloured drawing of sand and dissolving it after it's finished.⁵³ It is almost needless to mention the theatricality and performativity of these practices.

To sketch the essence of *visualization meditation* (and of the above examples) an observation by Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher from Nepal, is helpful. He calls visualization and imagination “the intentional mental fabrication of specific forms as aids to practice”.⁵⁴ One visualizes a specific form (and supports this with other means, like gestures or speech) to practice *something*; a quality of mind, a habituation, a state of mind, a change in perception. This essence can also be found in the etymology of the word used for visualization in the *Yoga Tantra* tradition: *kyerim* (Tib.). It points towards a sense of process and futurity as well as to a temporary state.⁵⁵ *Kye* can be translated as planting, engendering, producing and/or arousing. *Rim* can be translated as ‘level’ or ‘stage’, but also as ‘gradual’ and ‘succession’. Together they are most often translated as *generation stage*, but also as ‘gradual development of ideas’ and ‘phase of creation’ is used too.⁵⁶ To conclude these reflections, a few words on the intentionality of the *visualization meditation* follow; Gyurme Dorje, in the introduction to his translation of the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo* writes that meditators practice them with

⁵⁰ There is a lot more to say about this practice but for this research it is enough to have a basic understanding of how all faculties of someone's being are used to train specific attitudes or qualities and to change one's perception.

⁵¹ Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, 292.

⁵² Ibid. 295-301.

⁵³ For both practices I mention one quality here for the sake of simplicity, but both conceive of many more things that are practiced.

⁵⁴ Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche and Helen Tworkov. *Turning Confusion into Clarity: A Guide to the Foundation Practices of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2014), 346.

⁵⁵ Here you can see again that the idea of bardo as a constant transition as well as a state of transition in between two other states comes back in other aspects of the Buddhist path.

⁵⁶ To translate the different Tibetan transliterations I have used the translation tool with different Tibetan Dictionaries in it, provided by Thlib.org on: <http://www.thlib.org/reference/dictionaries/tibetan-dictionary/translate.php>

the “intention of enhancing spiritual realization and the fruition of their capacities as a human being”, which is what enlightenment is.⁵⁷ Thus, *visualization meditation* is an exercise in which one intentionally creates mental situations, possibly supported by physical means, in order to practice a way of perceiving or training a specific quality of mind and thereby strengthening one’s capacities and enhancing spiritual realization.

1.3 Attentiveness

When one would inattentively read the *Lonely Planet* and travel completely distracted, the travel book as well as the trip itself will not have made much sense. Neither would one have had an experience of the destination, nor would one be able to remember something of it. So, while traveling and preparing for the trip one should at least have a basic awareness of what one is doing. This also counts for preparing for *bardo* by doing *visualization meditation*. An important part of Buddhist epistemology relies on *mindfulness*, which is indispensable for any practice or reflection done. This is not the same mindfulness as the one practiced in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, because the aim is not relaxation but an attentiveness *of something*.⁵⁸ David George in *Buddhism as/in Performance* notes that “Buddha asks one to be ‘both spectator and participant of the activities’”, one is involved and at the same time aware of the mental and physical process which is evoked by any activity we do. John Powers in his *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* observes that, to be able to learn and transform one’s perception and habits one needs to have “awareness of what one is doing” and one needs to be “aware of mental processes and attitudes”.⁵⁹ In visualization meditation one is not only visualizing, but also introspective about what the provoked images do to you: you watch your response.

⁵⁷ Karma-glin-pa, et al, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*, 18.

⁵⁸ Marcus Boon, Eric Cazdyn, and Timothy Morton. *Nothing: Three Inquiries in Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015): 369.

⁵⁹ Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, 69.

1.4 The attitude of mind one develops in preparing for bardo: nongrasping

Recalling the *Lonely Planet* analogy as a way of looking at the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo*, we will now look at the section about the attitude while traveling, the ways in which one needs to *be*. While traveling to a foreign country this might be more related to behaviour and etiquette, and about mindfulness of certain signs of scam or bad weather or whatever could possibly lead to trouble. In the context of the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo* this relates more to inner attitude, a certain state of mind to have while *traveling bardo*. This attitude is what I will call a *non-grasping attitude of mind*, as my Buddhist teacher used to use this phrasing in his oral instructions at the Tibetan Buddhist centre *Lerab Ling* in the south of France.⁶⁰ I prefer the word ‘attitude’ rather than ‘state of mind’, because this *non-grasping*, as will be explained, is a way of being *with* things, with formations, either mental or physical.

The following explanation of *non-grasping* is built up by looking at the different translations of the terms used in the Tibetan script of the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo* and by a compilation of explanations given by Buddhist teachers in written books for a Western (Buddhist) audience *starting* to learn about Tibetan Buddhism. It is not, however, the exact rendition of what *nongrasping* points towards in the text of the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo*. I chose this way of explaining because I did not want to go into the depth of the exact articulation of what is pointed towards in the texts to avoid mistakes, misuse, and wrong cultural appropriation. It is not appropriate for me to explain what is, in the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo*, meant with phrasings like “Rest in the infinite state that is free of distraction and grasping” and with “I will abandon all grasping, yearning, and attachment”, because this is a way of being thought in the *Dzogchen* tradition.⁶¹ *Dzogchen* is a system of meditation practice within the Nyingma school, which is part of *Yoga Tantra* tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which was described before. *Dzogchen* is primarily an oral lineage of transmission. Teachings are told from master to student privately with the master checking if the student is ready for them: if he has done enough mind training. *Dzogchen* is also a nonconceptual tradition which has a big focus on practicing instead of studying. Written instructions are not accessible for me and the depth of instructions needed is only given to people who have practiced

⁶⁰ “About Lerab Ling,” Lerab Ling Website, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://lerabling.org/lang-en/>

⁶¹ Karma-glin-pa, et al, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 275.

a lot, through a process of transmission in which the role of the teacher is very important. These are not accessible for me during the scope of this research, therefore I decided not to elaborate one *non-grasping* from the Dzogchen perspective but use etymology and more general sources.

Looking at the Tibetan phrasing in the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo* from an etymological perspective, ‘grasping’ comes from the word *dzin*, (རྩིན་), which is a verb that can be translated into different words: “hold; bear; grasp; apprehend; conceive; identify”. When put next to another word, which is how it appears in the above two sentences of the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo*, it becomes more specified, as context is important for the meaning of Tibetan language. When the word *mè* (མེ་), which means, something like ‘free from’, is put after *dzin*, the translation of *dzin mè* becomes ‘the state of not holding onto subject and object’ and ‘with nothing to cling to’ and ‘non-fixation’.⁶² When the word *zhen* (ཞེན་) is put before *dzin*, in the sentence translated as: “I will abandon all grasping” it translates as: “tightly grasp” and “clinging and fixation to”.⁶³ In both sentences in the text in which *dzin* appears it appears as something to let go of, as something to be given up. Therefore, I describe *non-grasping* as a concept describing an attitude of mind which does not fixate on things, and which does not hold onto perceptions but, instead, is geared towards abandoning or letting go of a clinging attitude.

An image frequently used to describe the attitude of *dzin mè* is the act of looking at the sky with passing clouds. Lying in the grass while looking up to the sky, one allows the clouds to pass, without following them or anticipating them.⁶⁴ The clouds are just like phenomena according to Buddhism: interdependent formations, constantly changing and existing in multiplicity (clouds exist out of many, many drops of water). Looking at clouds with this knowledge (which we all have) implies an attitude towards a cloud in accordance with its ephemeral quality. You are not going to ‘hold’ a cloud or ‘catch’ a cloud. This is an attitude of *nongrasping*, which you can develop towards everything. Non-grasping can be understood as allowing things, formations, to change and evolve while at the same time acknowledging their current state. Another image of a nongrasping attitude of mind is beautifully

⁶² Thlib Translation Tool.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, 59.

described in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (and I encourage the reader to try the experiment described):

Let's try an experiment. Pick up a coin. Imagine that it represents the object at which you are grasping. Hold it tightly clutched in your fist and extend your arm, with the palm of your hand facing the ground. Now if you let go or relax your grip, you will lose what you are clinging onto. That's why you hold on. But there's another possibility: You can let go and yet keep hold of it. With your arm still outstretched, turn your hand over so that it faces the sky. Release your hand and the coin still rests on your open palm. You let go. And the coin is still yours, even with all this space around it. So, there is a way in which we can accept impermanence and still relish life, at one and the same time, without grasping.⁶⁵

According to Tibetan Buddhism everything is in continuous transition, nothing is ever the same, even though it might appear for us to be. So, knowing *bardo-as-continuous-transition*, underlying everything, we should always have this *non-grasping attitude*. But because we are not always aware of *bardo-as-continuous-transition*, we should, at least, train in this attitude for the moment continuous transition appears to us in *bardo-as-a-modality-of-existence*. By exercising this *non-grasping attitude*, eventually, one will have an attitude of mind in accordance with this continuous transition: by not trying to freeze anything through grasping one will not suffer from holding something unholdable.

1.5 Bardo as a lens to look at performance

So, in a *visualization meditation* the meditator imagines a world mentally, with the help of other means (for example physical or material), to train in a specific quality of mind or way of perceiving and get used to specific situations. The meditator might be called the director of the world visualized. In performance, worlds are also composed, and they can invite certain experiences in the spectator. In

⁶⁵ Ibid. 48.

performance, the creation of the world is partly placed out of the mind of the perceiver. It is the maker who composes a world, which can evoke experiences in the mind of the spectator. And the world is also partly made in the mind of the spectator during the perception of the piece. The possibility of using *bardo* as a lens to look at performance is based on the thesis that this difference doesn't lessen the efficacy of being in the composed worlds, and their invited mental states, to prepare for similar experiences in the future.

Following this understanding, it is possible to look at the composition of performances and pinpoint if and how they are related to one or both *bardo* expressions. With *bardo-as-continuous-transition* as a never stopping stream of evolving and changing phenomena and *bardo-as-an-intermediate-modality-of-existence* as a period with borders marking its separation between other modalities and at the same time linking them, characterized by an intensity of experience. It is then viable to look at how this composition invites an *attentive* and *non-grasping attitude*. How is the spectator made aware of mental processes and the outer environment and invited to allow formations to evolve, while at the same time acknowledging their current state? In the following two chapters these four concepts will be used to look at the two case studies, to see what revelations about “exercising being with transition” this perspective can bring.

Chapter 2 Continuum

Looking at *Continuum* (Johannes Bellinkx, 2020) from the perspective of bardo it is possible to analyse its composition and spectatorship so to shed light on the question how a performance can be a preparation for future periods of transition. After a short introduction to the performance, I will first establish what kind of world *Continuum* composes, what its characteristics are, what flavour it has and how this relates to bardo. This follows the idea that the situation composed can work in a similar way as *visualization meditation*, in which a way of perceiving or a quality of mind is practiced by visualizing a world with specific qualities and experiences. Second, it will be demonstrated that this experience can be related to the attitude of *non-grasping* as a way of being with transition.

In *Continuum* the audience is seated on moving carts, looking through a small rectangular frame. All which is perceived by the senses of the spectator as well as the spectator move. This generates an experience of constant movement. *Continuum* is an immersive experience in which motion, a huge white paper screen rotating and morphing in various ways, a light set up and an electronic soundscape on headphones creates a disorienting experience that relinquishes old reference systems.⁶⁶ With *Continuum* Johannes Bellinkx tries to create an experience of perceiving beyond our current, limited, polarized view. Bellinkx bases his work on Donald Hoffman who asserts that our brains focus on distinctions and contrast, which eventually results in polarization.⁶⁷ Bellinkx hopes “to create space for a new, more dynamic, broader, all-embracing perspective”.⁶⁸

2.1 How *Continuum* composes bardo-as-constant-transition

If you would try to give a name to what rules the realm of *Continuum*, it might possibly be: *constant movement*. What characterizes the performance is continuous motion, as all compositional materials are in flux. The white canvas you see through the frame moves continuously. It's moves into all directions,

⁶⁶ “Continuum,” Bellinkx Website, accessed August 10, 2021, <http://www.johannesbellinkx.com/website/continuum>

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

up and down and sometimes against the direction of the carts, which makes the feeling of speed increase. The cloth also morphs in different shapes and seems to float in wind created by the motion. The different ways in which the light hits the material strengthens the experience of it being never stable. The musical score, coming from underneath the audience's seats, consisting of several layers of beats and sounds also changes constantly. It flows from little auditive input associating with minimal music towards a plenitude of tones, noises, and rhythms. Because of this, you find yourself in a ceaseless transition that never seems to stop. There is no way you can make it stand still. In *Continuum*, *bardo-as-constant-transition* is focalized. By remaining in this world for 45 minutes, you have a kind of hyper-experience of continuous transition, thereby getting used to experiencing this transitory foundation of existence that, according to Buddhism, underlies our reality.

2.2 How *Continuum* composes *bardo-as-intermediate-modality-of-existence*

Even though *constant transition* is mainly experienced in the performance, different modalities of experience can also be distinguished, each with its own unique compositional characteristics and accompanying perceptions. In this sense, different *bardos*, in the understanding of *bardo-as-an-intermediate-modality-of-existence* can be identified within *Continuum*. *Bardo-as-an-intermediate-modality-of-existence* relates to past and future modalities of existence because it brings up a feeling of insecurity about the lost familiar environment and the yet unknown future. At the same time, it is also rooted in the experience of the modality of the present because of the intensity of the feeling of insecurity.

The first *intermediate modality* of *Continuum* is the transition between the outside world into the performance world. *Continuum* starts outside of the black box, in the foyer. The spectator gets instructions about how to get onto a small train of carts, what will happen after that, what you can do when you feel sick, etcetera. Then, the audience is placed on the small train, standing, or seated. You are covered with a black poncho which is attached to a small frame. Through this frame one's view is restricted; its dimensions are in the proportion of a movie frame, and only through this frame light and images can seep through. When the carts start moving details of the lived environment are focalized by

this perspective. One sees, for example, directory signs towards other auditoria, stairs and stacked chairs but also cracks in a wall, recognizable objects from daily reality. What passes by in the frame, gradually, starts to become less recognizable. Lights change, and the materials shift to abstract formations of the white synthetic cloth. After a while no forms related to daily life are perceivable anymore and you find yourself in a new, alien environment. This shift, composed by the replacing of everyday matter (chairs, signs etc.) with lights, and the synthetic cloth relates to an *intermediate-modality-of-existence*. You are reminded of a past modality: everyday life, but drifts away from it into a new, distinct environment which asks for a new way of perceiving with your senses (due to the restriction of view, the continuous movement, and the alien nature of is shown). This shift has a sense of intensity to it because it challenges your senses with unfamiliarity which results into a sense of being present.

Continuum exists out of other intermediate modalities, characterized as *intermediate* because a previous way of perceiving is no longer viable, but you are not yet adjusted to a new one. The musical score for example has a low density of input for some time, which combined with a slow speed of the cart and a certain way in which the light falls on the canvas results into a modality distinct from the one following it. In this one the cart is quicker, and the musical score is multi-layered, with a high intensity of bass and deeper sounds. In the two separate modalities the speed, the light, the type of morphing and the music match into that modality creating a temporary world *within* the big world of *Continuum*. Because each new modality is distinct from the previous modality, you continuously adjust to their specificity, but when adjusted the compositional materials change so your perception is challenged. Your eyes for example need to adjust to the new input (less or more light, closer or further away canvas). This challenge brings you into an intermediate modality, related to the past and future but at the same time present in the intensity of adjusting.

A characteristic of the bardo of after death which Dzongsar Khyentse in *Living and Dying*, a contemporary commentary on the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo* writes also illustrates how *Continuum* relates to *bardo-as-an-intermediate-modality-of-existence*. He says “[..] all your perceptions will be naked and

unfiltered, instantly changing how you interact with your surroundings”.⁶⁹ *Continuum* as was shown is just like bardo, an alien environment for the spectator (not only in vision but also in physical and auditory experience). And in *Continuum* you are also constantly refocusing your eyes and ears, your sensory qualities are defied every time a new phase starts. Another illustration of the relation has to do with physicality. In *Continuum* you are physically challenged. A heaviness and feeling of losing physical ground are evoked when the cart starts to move, but even more so when halfway through the performance it suddenly feels as if the seat on which you are sitting starts to sink (which it actually does, the facilitators press on the springs of the cart to make it move up and down a bit). A fellow spectator noted about the experience of *Continuum* that she felt the gravity in her body and at the same time she experienced a kind of weightlessness. It might be hard for the mind to make sense of the bodily sensations that are happening in *Continuum*, or to make those sensations into a story which you can understand and process. This is also described in the *Bardo Thödol Chenmo* as a characteristic of the intermediate modality of the dying process, and which we might experience in the everyday when we are unsure about how to continue living.⁷⁰

The physical experience in *Continuum* is crucial for the piece to be immersive and personal. Without it the audience would be too distant from the world composed. It brings you into the world, just like in visualization meditation you are part of the imaginary world. Adam Alston in ‘Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre’ speaks of physical involvement allowing for an immersive experience.⁷¹ The production of the spectator’s experience is central to immersive theatre and evoked by stimulating the different senses, which is also true for *Continuum* too. Giannachi, emphasizes the importance of *distancing* the virtual reality player from everyday reality for immersion to take place.⁷² This is a strategy which Bellinkx also uses by the set-up of the cart and poncho and the disappearance of identifiable objects. The outcomes of how you

⁶⁹ Jamyang Khyentse, *Living Is Dying: How to Prepare for Death, Dying, and Beyond* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2020), 73.

⁷⁰ Fremantle *Luminous Emptiness*, 227.

⁷¹ Adam Alston, “Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre,” *Performance Research* 18, no. 2 (2013). 4 – 6.

⁷² Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, “Bordering and Shattering the Stage: Mobile Audiences as Compositional Forces,” In *Staging Spectators in Immersive Performances: Commit Yourself!*, edited by Doris Kolesch, Theresa Schütz and Sophie Nikoleit, 59-71. New York: Routledge, 2019. 61.

would look at *Continuum* from the point of view of how *Continuum* evokes *immersion* and how it creates an experience of bardo are complementing each other. This is interesting to note as it shows that immersion as a theatrical concept could be an addition to the lens of bardo as well as a way of approaching *visualization meditation* through a performance perspective.

2.3 *Continuum* activating attentiveness

Continuum invites attentiveness because of its seating and the nonrepresentational character of the materials passing by. This strategy makes you present in what is happening and aware of how you respond to it mentally and physically. This is important for it to be a practice helpful in everyday life.

Continuum, just like long meditation sessions, has a bit of physical hardship in it, because without a backrest and with a seat that is slightly tilted forward you need to hold up your back yourself. In her review of the performance for *Theaterkrant.nl*, Fransien van der Putt compares it to a Catholic mass, where people used to kneel on hard prayer benches.¹ The seating activates the spectator physically, which makes attending *Continuum* not only a mental practice for transition, but a physical one too. This is strengthened by other input that creates awareness of your body, like the bass sounds from the speakers underneath your seat vibrating and the cart moving haltingly at first. Good physical posture, upright and relaxed, inspires the mind in meditation to be aware, notes Sogyal Rinpoche in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*.⁷³ “Meditation arises naturally once your posture and attitude are inspired.”⁷⁴

Attentiveness is also evoked by the concreteness of things passing by at the beginning of the performance: curtains, a door frame, a dirty spot on a wall; all materials do not represent something. They are just to be observed for themselves, in a nonrepresentative way. Showing material in its concreteness, is what Hans Ties Lehman calls this way of presenting phenomena.⁷⁵ By the absence of a narrative, by simplicity, and by the independent character of the materials a certain basic mindfulness for outer detail is evoked. Claire Bishop in *Installation Art: A Critical History* distinguishes four types

⁷³ Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, 78-80.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 78.

⁷⁵ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 98-99.

of modalities of experience in installation works. One is interesting for this research: a *heightened perception*. It ties to installations which concentrate on sonic, visual, and tactile stimuli (more than on mimesis or interpretation). She connects such works with phenomenology and its notion of an embodied viewer.⁷⁶

Because of a lack of signification and relational meaning of the presented material in *Continuum* a phenomenology of perception is created, you start to see what is happening in your mind. Seeing is seen, the awareness of how one sees comes to the fore. When someone can perceive what is happening internally, one can learn from it. So, by evoking *attentiveness*, mental and physical presence, *Continuum* becomes an introspective practice of *how* you physically and mentally are or can be in a bardo modality.

2.4 How *Continuum* evokes an attitude of nongrasping

From the above descriptions it is already possible to get a sense of the flexibility of mind which is invited for and needed to remain calm and not panic in the world of *Continuum*. A fellow spectator said about their experience, it: “is an invitation to let go. To leave your mind to wander wherever it wants to go”.⁷⁷ Bellinkx writes about the aim of *Continuum*, “to disrupt Cartesian enlightenment thinking”.⁷⁸ The experience of the spectator and Bellinkx words already sketch a sensibility to a non-dualistic perception. A perception which retreats from fixating on dichotomies and contrasts. A perception that strongly relates to the attitude of nongrasping which was described in Chapter 1 as a way of being which is in accord with an everchanging reality by allowing things to evolve and change while at the same time acknowledging their current state.

Fremantle describes that in bardo “[..] we lose the ability to identify and define the information we receive from the senses” and this also happens in *Continuum*.⁷⁹ In *Continuum* this is caused by the continual passing by of different perceptual frameworks over a ‘long’ duration, the 45 minutes of the performance. By the change of light and formations of the canvas different worlds take shape in front

⁷⁶ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 6.

⁷⁷ Anonymous feedback notes of spectators provided by Johannes Bellinkx.

⁷⁸ “Continuum,” Bellinkx Website, accessed August 10, 2021.

⁷⁹ Fremantle, *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 226.

of the cart. Like in slow cinema, the one take shot, seen out of the poncho frame of *Continuum*, passes different landscapes and sculptures which associate with grey rock formations, moonlike landscapes, ice mountains and grey abstract paintings by Rothko. However, the images' morphing makes that there is not one association which sets in your mind, the associations slip away as easily as they come. Sometimes it even seems as if everything is swimming before your eyes. Additionally, there is no narrative given and this together with the ungraspable formations make that the space you are in is unrecognizable, there is nothing that you 'know', can conceive, and therefore cling to. This halting of a production of meaning connects with what Lehman notes as a characteristic of post dramatic theatre, describing this as "to store the sensory impressions with 'evenly hovering attention'".⁸⁰ Being with this indefinability leads to a space of indeterminacy, which can be uncomfortable because you cannot take control, but which, as seen in *Continuum* can slowly lead to a relaxation of the attempts to determine what you see. This relaxation leads to a sense of resting. Resting as someone who has nothing else to accomplish or to think about. Relaxed and open.

A nongrasping attitude furthermore relates to not fixating on yourself as a perceiver nor on the object of perception. Normally, a perceiver and an object are seen as two separate entities. In a nongrasping attitude, the subject has a more direct experience of reality, with which she coincides, as it were. Different spectators have said something about this mingling, calling it "fucking with my proprioception" and "The where and the who fused".⁸¹ The normal orientation, of a subject watching an object, deviates by alteration of the sensorial perception. A modality of experience which Bishop imagined in relation to installation art, next to *heightened perception*, is *mimetic engulfment*. It involves a sense of displacement which is experienced in *Continuum* according to the spectators' impressions. The construction of the experience makes that you are uncertain of your position in the composition, are you *in* the material, or still seated? Bishop refers to *mimetic engulfment* in relation to "to environments that seem to lack a solid size or shape, due to a play with scale, light or mirrors, or, as in the work of

⁸⁰ Lehman, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 87.

James Turrell, through immense darkness and tactics of colour deprivation” observes Groot Nibbelink.⁸² Bellinkx also works with sight deprivation due to darkness and lights, aligning *Continuum* with this type of work.

Because of the displacement of the subject in *Continuum*, the subject-object relation becomes distorted. It results in a seemingly direct contact with reality, without cognitive concepts or interpretation in the mind of the subject coming in between. This might be what *immersion* in the context of using bardo as a perspective on theatre means: there is no subject being immersed in an object anymore, but what is left is ‘just’ experience. When a subject becomes perceptibly one with an object that is moving this means that the subject starts to move with the object. If you fixate on yourself, as subject, and on the object that you are perceiving as two separate entities and the object starts to move, change, it only moves because the subject perceiving is still. When the subject moves with the object, there’s no movement perceivable. When the subject transitions with the object, there is no transition, just moment after moment evolving continuously. It enables being *with* transition without having a problematic relationship with it. This loosening of the subject-object duality is evoked by *Continuum* and thus presented to the spectator as a possible way of being with transition.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter followed the line of thought in which composing an immersive world for a spectator can be seen as a similar method to (visualisation) meditation. When the world composed relates to transition states, attending this world can be like a preparation for them, just like yogis prepare themselves for bardo by visualizing bardo worlds and thereby experiencing them in actuality. *Continuum* composes a world of constant transition through the everchanging materials, the constant movement of the spectator and the fixed frame through which the experience of change increases. Different phases, short intermediate modalities, can be pointed out, in which distinctive perceptions are evoked. They together are experienced as a continuum of transition states. Their temporality and their relation to the preceding

⁸² Groot Nibbelink, “Bordering and Shattering the Stage: Mobile Audiences as Compositional Forces,” 63.

and following state is apparent. This makes the modalities merge into a bigger whole which is flux. Therefore, the composition of *Continuum* relates more to *bardo-as-continuous-transition* than to *bardo-as-an-intermediate-modality-of-existence*. However, zooming out to the experience of the spectator and the place of the performance in her everyday life, attending *Continuum* can be seen as a *bardo-as-an-intermediate-modality-of-existence* in which continuous transition is hyper experienced.

Attentiveness is evoked in the audience by the concreteness of the materials and the physical challenge of the seating. Thus, the whole experience has a possibility of self-reflection on how you respond to the experience, crucial for it to be an exercise preparing one for future transition.

Nongrasping as an attitude of mind, which describes a way of being in which one allows things to evolve and at the same time acknowledges their current state. *Continuum* invoked *nongrasping* in three ways. One loses one's ability to identify objects because of the everchanging, abstract materials presented, and one does not have control over one's perception. Because of that one stops trying to determine and gain control over the images which results in a relaxation and surrendering of grasping. Furthermore, a fusion between subject and object is sometimes created, because of the darkness and the motion on two sides (spectator and presented images). Which results in a direct contact, where the subject stops distinguishing and thereby separating herself from the material. Thus, grasping is also eliminated as to grasp onto something you need a subject and object relation which is not always present in *Continuum*.

Chapter 3 Curve

“I often invite you to a world where you no longer fully understand what you experience, where a kind of surrendering, wonderment and alienation is asked for” says Boukje Schweigman in an interview about *Curve* (2015). In the performance you slowly walk through an installation made of a white inflatable tunnel in the form of an Archimedean spiral. Spectators follow the pace of a metronome echoing over a big field or city square at which the snail shell like structure is placed. Taking their steps in the rhythm of the minimalist musical score, they go on a quieting and alienating trip through an unknown landscape. Gradually you move away from daily reality in an individual experience in which you might be confronted with yourself. This chapter looks at the world composed by *Curve* using the lens of *bardo*, with its two expressions, attentiveness, and the attitude of nongrasping.

3.1 *The world of Curve; a composition of intermediate modalities of existence*

It is possible to point towards both *bardo-as-intermediate-modality-of-existence*, and *as-continuous-transition* in *Curve*. After a short sketch of the composition, based on the performance at Oerol Festival 2016, Terschelling, it is shown how *bardo-as-intermediate-modality-of-existence* is most apparent in *Curve* – distinguishing it from *Continuum*, which mostly is a composition of *bardo-as-continuous-transition*.

A white spiral is found on a big field near a forest. At the start of the performance, you leave your belongings in a safe deposit. After that, the guide shows you how to walk in the tempo of the metronome, you walk through a forest for 8 minutes, following a white line. A facilitator awaits you at the entrance of the spiral and helps you to take your shoes off. You enter the white inflatable tunnel through a small slit. It constantly bends to the right in the same angle. The environment is very light and nothing from the outside world creeps in. Visual and auditive input is reduced. After a while, you enter a red tunnel where you are invited to put on a pair of protection glasses with a red filter. After going through another slit you feel fresh air and hear birds. You are outside but only see red silhouettes of people moving. For a while you are standing in a soundscape circling around you. After which you are

brought back to the other side of the white tunnel. This time it curves to the left. Walking further the white starts to be dispersed by a black line swirling around the tunnel and growing bigger along the walk. Darkness looms in front. Then everything is pitch black and you cannot see any more until light rays appear in the bend of the tunnel. A slit appears again. When squeezing yourself through it, you meet the outside world again. Barefoot you walk further, hearing the birds, seeing the trees. At the end of the walk your shoes are placed neatly in a line, to put on again, marking the end of the performance.

Curve can be related to *bardo-as-an-intermediate-modality-of-existence* because it composes a world existing out of different phases, marked by the different colours in the tunnel. Every transition from one phase to another is a step forward in the direction of the unknown, with the familiar lurking in the back. The insecurity this causes connects the modality of the present moment (the transition) with the past and future modalities, making it an *intermediate* modality. *Curve* has moments in which there is no change, in which you feel stable and adjusted to the experiences. This makes *Curve* a composition of different *intermediate-modalities-of-existence* as the abrupt changes create a sense of intensity in experiencing transition. The hyper-experience of transition is not an evolving stream (*Continuum*) in *Curve* but more a set of moments of contrast and big change, every time causing a sense of insecurity and disorientation.

This insecurity and disorientation are caused by the abstract, changing and alien visual, aural, and physical stimuli surrounding the spectator. Visually the tunnel, depriving you from any daily light, changes in colour per phase. Aurally the electro-acoustic composition seems otherworldly. It conceives of echoing sounds and white noise fading in and fading out, as if it is making a motion coming closer and moving away from the speaker. It is unclear where the sounds are coming from, as you cannot detect a direction with your ears, and it changes when inside or outside of the tunnel. Physically you need to move through slits between the different parts, unable to see and hear for a moment with the inflatable material pressing on your body. The curving environment without landmarks makes you unable to know the distance you cover, which increases disorientation. These examples illustrate how in *Curve* you find yourself in a modality of existence in which you experience *an intensity of destabilization*, linking the stable modality of the past with the not yet stability of the future.

Continuum composes a world in which continuous motion governs the experience. *Curve*'s realm, instead, is one in which *minimalism and simplicity* rule; sensory input is deprived and a kind of asceticism in scenography and auditive input replace everyday stimuli. Because of the minimalist outlook change comes to the fore more drastically, causing *Curve*'s intensity. *Curve* also has a kind of slowness to it, because of the walking pace and the audio composition which is more stable opposed to constantly evolving (such as in *Continuum*). This simplicity does contrast with the world before and after the performance, making *Curve* into a pause, which Fremantle calls a 'hiatus': "It is an interval, a hiatus, a gap", a term used to explain *bardo-as-an-intermediate-modality-of-existence* in Chapter 1".⁸³ Therefore, *Curve*, more than *Continuum* foregrounds how a world in which you can practice being with *bardo-as-an-intermediate-modality-of-existence* can be composed.

Bardo-as-continuous-transition is in Chapter 1 described as the continuous movement underlying everything, as an always present state of affair which we do not experience when we do not focus on it. *Curve*'s relation regarding continuous transition is coming from an associative component of the composition. In *Continuum* associations related to more earthly and cosmic images (rocks, moonscapes, mountains) are invoked. *Curve* with the white and black environment, the play with light in a tunnel and the going through slits, invites more associative thoughts in the direction of near death and birth experiences. These associations relating to a possible cycle of birth, life, and death, do relate to the Buddhist thought that *bardo-as-continuous-transition* also implicates: the cycle does not stop. A sense of continuous change is also evoked by the constant walking in the same pace, you are constantly changing your environment, moving through space.

3.2 Attentiveness in Curve

'De uitnodiging van Boukje Schweigman' an article by theatre scholar Bas van Peijpe about Schweigman's work is subtitled "About theatre as islands of attentiveness and concentration".⁸⁴ It

⁸³ Fremantle, *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 54.

⁸⁴ Bas van Peijpe, "De uitnodiging van Boukje Schweigman," *Theater Schrift Lucifer*, no. 5 (2007).

exemplifies the quality of experiencing which her work invites; attentive and without judging.⁸⁵ It is one of the other conditions which make *Curve* into a practice for transition. Because the walking pace is slower than usual, and the sensory input is sober and minimal your mind slows down. The walking to the metronome also functions as an anchor to return to with your attention when your mind wanders or freaks out because of the unfamiliarity, it gives the mind a steadiness needed to experience the whole installation with attentiveness. The fact that *Curve* (as well as *Continuum*) isolates the spectator from other audience members also makes the experience more attentive. There is no distraction due to other's responses or by keeping up an appearance for them. Experiencing a performance individually makes you attentively return to your own experience, your own body, your own mind. You become able to reflect and become aware of one's responses, of what is happening when you are in a transition phase. Resulting in a detailed and deeper memory of this for future use.

3.3 Curve's invitation for a nongrasping attitude

Curve and *Continuum* both share an overall structure in which stacking compositional tactics over time create an experience of drifting away from the everyday and entering an evolving alien environment. In *Continuum* the everyday is gradually replaced by moving, abstract formations, which make you slowly stops determining their kind. In *Curve* as soon as you enter the white tunnel you find yourself in a completely alien environment in one instance. The everyday is replaced by a minimalist play with light and colour which surrounds you. The relaxation of grasping, which in *Continuum* was partly evoked by not being able to determine anymore is not a strategy here. Rather, overwhelming surroundings are composed which result in a letting go of fixation.

Looking at big times of crisis in life, sensory experiences which deviate everyday perception can happen. For example, I think of a moment after having received unexpected but heavy news when day light can suddenly be perceived as very sharp. Or when you are very sick you can have a blurry vision. For all of

⁸⁵ Ibid.

us there is a possibility that a shocking unexpected event happens with extreme and intense perceptions accompanying with it. A car crash, however small, an earthquake, a big fire... etc. *Curve* composes an extreme and intense environment for the spectator to traverse through, with its bright light, extreme darkness, and heavy sounds amongst other compositional tools. These can be so overwhelming to your senses that thinking and internal doing stops, and you are left with an open mind. You can also conceive this internal stopping as a sense of 'blocking' - the opposite of an open mind. However, because it is a theatre situation, which provides a sense of safety I want to argue this does not happen here. In *Curve* there are zips in the tunnel to step out of the experience. This safety gives a sense of trust which can make the overwhelming vision into a very freeing experience when you let it be. So, *Curve* composes overwhelming environments inviting for a relaxation of interpretation and fixation. You can 'hold' the experiences with a nongrasping attitude by which you are not blown away into anxiety or a panic attack, just like with the coin example posed in Chapter 1. By not fixating on any of the intensity you can hold your ground while being in an extreme environment.

Another effect of the dark environment in *Curve* is that it challenges the experience of your presence and thereby the subject-object relationship. As discussed in relation to *Continuum*, when the subject coincides with the object, there cannot be grasping. A similar dissolution is created in *Curve*, not by motion, but by the absence of light. Claire Bishop in her book *Installation Art: A Critical History* introduces the psychiatrist Eugène Minkowski who describes how a dark room can be characterized by a quality which envelops and embraces, makes the ego completely permeable. The ego cannot confirm itself in relation to the darkness, but only becomes confused and one with it.⁸⁶ The darkness, but also the non-existing orientation points in the tunnel (there are no corners or walls) create moments in which you no longer notice who you are and what the tunnel is. Both coincide completely in your experience. The subject-object distinction dissolves. This can be very scary as you might feel as if you are losing your existence. But *Curve*'s duration and the knowledge of the possibility of escape (through zippers

⁸⁶ Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 84

in the tunnel), gives a feeling of safety. This safety eases you and helps to give into the experience of losing your subject position and coinciding with the installation.

3.4. Concluding remarks

Elinor Fuchs, in her text “EFs Visit to a Small Planet” describes performances as ‘small planets’ with their own internal logic.⁸⁷ A performance can be understood as a world in which different elements need to be seen in connection to the totality of the world. Looking at performances in this way, trying to find their structure, can be called a cosmology of performance. *Curve* and *Continuum* may be seen as two planets. Or two worlds, as I have described them already, just as in Tibetan Buddhist literature words like *realm* and *world* are used to describe what one visualizes or what the bardos between life and death may look like.

When put next to each other in the universe of the performance field, looked at from afar, they can be seen as quite alike. Both work with similar logics and materials. Creating, for the spectator, an immersive, sensorial installation with the use of abstract forms and materials which replace everyday stimuli. Thereby forming an alien environment for the audience, in which your physical, visual and auditive perception becomes unstable and disoriented, leading to an unavoidable adaptation and letting go of old habituations. When looking further into both planets, nuances can be found. *Curve* composes several minimalist worlds you travel through, each with a distinct environment, creating several modalities of transition in which the end of the familiar is hyper experienced. The change from one to another is rapid and sudden. *Curve* thus primarily relates to *bardo-as-intermediate-modality-of-existence* as this marks phases of transition in which change is hyper experienced. *Continuum* instead aligns more with *bardo-as-continuous-transition*, which marks the continuous change of everything, focusing more on the state of things on a foundational level instead of instances in which change is experienced.

⁸⁷ Elinor Fuchs, "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play," *Theater* 34, no. 2 (2004): 4-9.

When looking at the planets in terms of the invited attitude of mind both *Curve* and *Continuum* invite for an *attentive* and *nongrasping* attitude. *Attentiveness* is invited by minimalist scenography and audio and the slow pace. *Nongrasping* includes, in both performances, a dissolution of the subject-object relation, in which the spectator might experience a coinciding with the installation. The strategies composing this invitation are different. *Curve* invites the audience to stop grasping and fixating by creating a safe environment in which you experience overwhelming environments, such as total darkness. *Continuum* composes a glitch in your ability to identify materials and a loss of control over your perceptions. Because the composition is continuously evolving you stops grasping on its separate entities. All strategies evoke *nongrasping* because they build up over time. Duration and repetition of a similar tactic can be therefore seen as another stimulant for letting go of grasping.

It is interesting to note that *nongrasping* as a concept derived from Buddhism and shown in *Curve* and *Continuum* as an attitude which can be invited for by performances, seems to align with the concept of *immersion* as Doris Kolesch identifies it. “Immersion has to do with how we experience, understand, conceptualise—and sometimes fantasise about the blurring or even annihilation of—the boundaries between subject and media, between observer and surroundings, broadly understood” she notes.⁸⁸ However, *nongrasping* is an attitude trained and evoked by a meditator, to eventually have it as an attitude to everything, and *immersion* is an experience which arises from a specific composition. This context makes the experience distinct. Kolesch also conceptualizes immersion as “the dynamic of oscillating between embeddedness and distance, of submersion and surfacing. Hence, my emphasis on immersion as an experience of a threshold, of a transition”.⁸⁹ Immersion as an intermediate state between engulfment and distance seems to easily connect to describing it as *bardo*, which could then point to every experience of *immersion* being an experience of *bardo*.

⁸⁸ Doris Kolesch, “Immersion and spectatorship at the interface of theatre, media tech and daily life: An Introduction,” In *Staging Spectators in Immersive Performances: Commit Yourself!*, edited by Doris Kolesch, Theresa Schütz and Sophie Nikoleit, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 4.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, two different fields of study and practice, namely Tibetan Buddhism and contemporary performance, were coupled. It was demonstrated how they can jointly answer the questions whether and how contemporary theatre may be a training ground to exercise (an alternative) way of being with (periods of) transition. Buddhism was chosen because it is a nontheistic religion which emphasizes watching the mind and phenomena to find out how suffering arises. It argues that suffering is caused by not living in accordance with the natural laws of *interdependence*, *multiplicity* and *impermanence*. This shows the importance of studying impermanence in the religion. *Bardo* is a specifically Tibetan Buddhist concept describing periods in which one can have a heightened sense of impermanence and transition. The *Bardo Thödol Chenmo* is a guidebook for Buddhist practitioners describing *bardo* periods one can experience and the preparatory practices one can do to be in these periods and use them for spiritual enhancement. The *Bardo Thödol Chenmo*, western academic and traditional commentaries on it, other sources such as the Tibetan dictionary, and my own study and practice allowed me to streamline the immense scope and variety of Buddhist teachings on impermanence and transition and its possible relations with theatre into a workable toolbox or lens to look at theatre. This lens is based on the idea that when a performance creates an immersive experience of *bardo*, it offers the spectator a place to become acquainted with these kinds of experiences in a safe context -a training ground. When the performance also invites *attentiveness* and a *nongrasping attitude* the spectator can practice being with this situation with a possible attitude towards change and impermanence, an attitude which may be different from the one which is usually present.

Using this lens to look at the performances *Continuum* and *Curve* showed ways in how performances function as an exercise for being with transition continuously as well as with periods of (big) transition. To use *bardo* systematically as a lens to look at performances I divided the concept into two ‘expressions’ of its meaning, which are actually intertwined and traditionally not divided. The performances showed that *bardo-as-continuous-transition* can be experienced by a composition existing out of a continuously evolving stream of moving materials (including audience seating). *Bardo-as-intermediate-modality-of-existence* can be experienced by a composition in which a world, with a

specific modality of experience is replaced (gradually or at once) with an entirely different and alien one, causing a disorientation and need for adaptation which makes one very present in that modality of transition while at the same time reminded of the past. *Attentiveness* can be invited by the concreteness of materials, physical challenge, slowness in development and an anchor to which one can bring one's focus back, such as a metronome. *Nongrasping* is invited by not being able to identify (anymore) what is presented to you and resting the fixation on yourself as separate from the installation, becoming one with it. The latter can be caused by extreme darkness, overwhelming environments caused by light or scale with no landmarks to orient oneself with and a similar movement of yourself and the installation. Making a generalization, it can be said that *bardo-as-continuous-transition* can be composed by similar tactics as *bardo-as-an-intermediate-modality-of-existence*, however they are used slower, in a continuous stream, like a river. *Bardo-as-an-intermediate-modality-of-existence* is composed by the tactics used in a more abrupt way, with the interruption of seemingly stable periods, more like waves crashing into the shore.

I am aware that this thesis has taken a 2500-year-old, Asian, tradition of faith out of its context to propose an alternative way of perceiving and attending a universal truth in a cultural context which is neoliberal, capitalist and Western society. This has had the implication that certain important elements not relevant in the context of the research question have not been established in the detail which would be needed to have a full authentic transference of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to the West. A transference which is believed to be predicted by Padmasambhava, who is said to have established Buddhism in Tibet.⁹⁰ After Tibet's cultural revolution, he is quoted often: "When the iron bird flies, and horses run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the World, and the Dharma will come to the land of the Red Man."⁹¹ I have done my best to stay true to the original meaning of the terms and practices and indicated when I have interpreted in a different way than traditionally done. Thereby trying to inform the context where I live and work with insights I gained from studying with

⁹⁰ John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, 371 – 375.

⁹¹ Charles S. Prebish, Kenneth K. Tanaka, and Kenneth Ken'ichi Tanaka. *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, (University of California Press, 1998.), 6.

traditional Tibetan teachers. Hopefully it will prove to be beneficial for all contexts, the Buddhist, performance and beyond.

This research filled a gap in the discourse on performance and Buddhism by reversing the methodology which David George and Silvia Battista used to couple Buddhism and performance. It used a Buddhist-informed perspective to look at performances instead of looking at the performativity and dramaturgy of meditation and Buddhist cultural expressions. Because it focused on transition periods mainly, it was not satisfactory enough in relating to other possible relations between the two disciplines. It would be useful to examine the aspects of the lens of *bardo* and their relationship with performance separately. For example, to look at *nongrasping* in relation to immersion. By doing this, more insight in the correlation between the two disciplines can be found.

This research is a small part of a start of performance studies' discourse articulating the possible relations between the two disciplines. However, it did succeed in showing what an alternative way of being with transition and impermanence Buddhism proposes and how performance can stand in line with this. The quality of this way of being, acknowledging one's experiences and pausing one's fixation on them, relates to an attitude similar to an attitude Donna Haraway enunciates. This prominent scholar in ecofeminism and posthumanism poses to respond to the human desire to stop things from happening in the future by "clearing away the present and the past in order to make future for coming generations."⁹² In her book, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, she argues to stay with the trouble, which "requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings."⁹³ This *staying with* and *nongrasping* does not contradict activism. Rather, it has a sense of working with the experiences instead of against them. In Buddhism *nongrasping* is not a passive acceptance of things. Alternately, knowing phenomena to be temporal, and knowing the suffering that comes from people's ignorance about this, evokes compassion

⁹² Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

and propels one into doing. This non-doing echoes research about negative performativity, such as the writings of Konstantina Georgelou in ‘performless: dramaturgies of performing less.’⁹⁴ It also resonates with the concept of the Dutch mime based *zero* articulated as ‘a way of thinking’ by Marijn de Langen.⁹⁵ It would be interesting to focus on these discourses in relation to *nongrasping* as an attitude coming from Buddhism and the forms it can take in performance.

Further research on the intersections between Buddhism and performance can also be undertaken into the direction of the two other important concepts which Buddhism understands to be foundations of existence. They are *no self* and *dependent arising*, which according to Greta Gaard “echo conceptual formations of the new materialisms and material ecocriticism.”⁹⁶ Because Buddhism translates every topic into a practice, which is according to David George, a performance, it would be interesting to see how these (Buddhist) practical applications of the concepts could shed light on the performance and/or exercising of new materialist concepts and ecocriticism, just as this research did with impermanence and transition.

I hope this project has contributed to an acknowledgement in performance studies about the value of attending the intersection between performance and religion and spirituality. May it not be the last in its kind. Also, I hope it provides theatre makers with a new interpretation of their work, seeing it in a bigger perspective. May it inspire performance practice and result in more situations of exercise. At last, I hope the attitude proposed inspires people to attend phenomena, and especially challenges related to transitions and change differently. May we be more present to them and not try to fix anything, people, places, times, animals, nature into one solid position. As my teacher used to say: “real love is letting go of grasping.”⁹⁷ May we love in that way.

⁹⁴ Konstantina Georgelou, “performless: dramaturgies of performing less,” In *Practicing Composition: Making Practice*, edited by Kirsi Monni and Ric Allsopp (Helsinki: Theatre Academy of the University of Arts, 2015), 142.

⁹⁵ Marijn de Langen, *Mime denken: Nederlandse mime als manier van denken in en door de theaterpraktijk*. (Phd Diss., Utrecht University, 2017).

⁹⁶ Greta Gaard, “Mindful new materialisms: Buddhist roots for material ecocriticism’s flourishing,” *Material ecocriticism* 291 (2014), 300.

⁹⁷ Sogyal Rinpoche, “Accepting impermanence”, Sydney, Part of a talk given on 29 February 2021. Youtube Video, 5:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-K8-S47xyFw>

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Performance Credits

Continuum

Concept and Direction: Johannes Bellinkx

Artistic co-creation and dramaturgy: Tamar Blom

Artistic co-creation and composition: Dennis van Tilburg

Light design: Grisha Rungen, Neal Groot

Creative Production: Jakob Proyer

Installation: Soultech - Merijn Versnel and Guido Bevers and Merel Kamp (sacs)

Production: Production of SoAP Maastricht, The Netherlands

Co-production: Feikes Huis Amsterdam, The Netherlands and C-Takt Neerpelt/Genk, Belgium

Curve

Design and Concept: Cocky Eek

Musical composition: Martin Franke

Concept and Direction: Boukje Schweigman

Direction assistant: Anemone Oostvriesland

Facilitators: Anne-Pauline van der A, Mette Bunschoek, Marijke van Es, Petra van Gerwen, Ida Goossens, Harry ter Heegde, Reshma Jagernath, Ans de Jong, Hannegijs Jonker, Jildau Kooistra, Paula van Kuijvenhoven, Bette van Lunteren, Joop Onk, Jochem van Rijsingen, Erin Stel, Dio van Velden, Anouk van Dijk, Silke Janssen, Klazien Pelleboer, Ben Terwel, Yara van de Velde, Greetje Wijnholds, Lisa Ruskus

Technicians: Jurr van Diggele, Gerrit Schilp, Adriaan Beukema

Production: Yoni Vermeire

Assistent Production: Ruben Bosch, Irene Hagemans, Yola Parie, Renske Rip

Communication: Machteld Kuntz, Marjolein van der Meer, Mo Visser

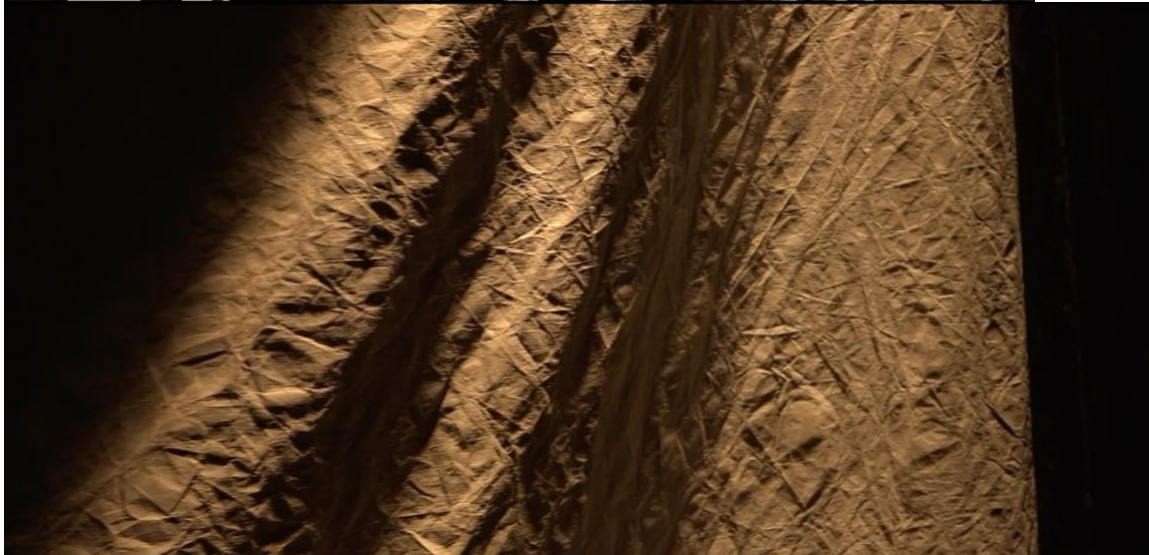
Managing director: Rachel Feuchtwang, David van Griethuyzen

A Production of: Schweigman& and Het Houten Huis

Appendix 1 - Images of Continuum and Curve

Images of Continuum

All three images derived from screenshotting the trailer of Continuum.⁹⁸



⁹⁸ “Continuum,” Bellinkx Website, accessed August 10, 2021, <http://www.johannesbellinkx.com/website/continuum>

Images of Curve



Image 2 – Saris & den Engelsman



Image 3 - Wout Nooitgedagt



Image 1 – Saris & den Engelsman