

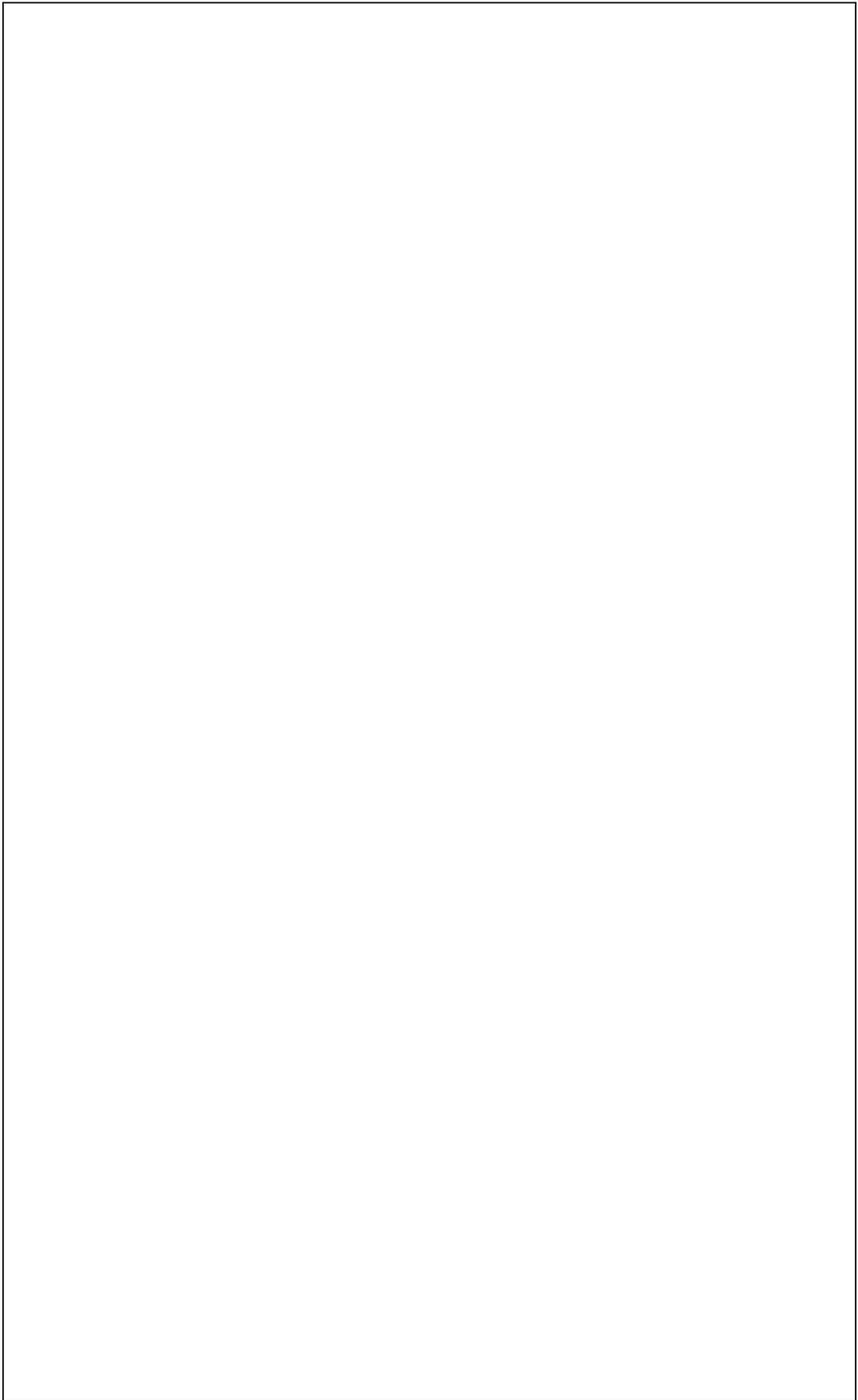
I N T H E M I D S T O F T H I N G S A T
T H E C E N T R E O F N O T H I N G

T h e d r a m a t u r g y o f p r o g r a m m i n g

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introduction

As a Master student Theatre Studies I chose to graduate with a specialization in dramaturgy. This means that my internship and final thesis had to focus on some understanding of dramaturgy. Guiding my fellow students and me was Marianne van Kerkhoven, one of the most well-known dramaturges of Europe and certainly the most published in the Dutch speaking area. Dramaturgy is a fluent term and it refers to a diverse practice. It's first and foremost associated with theatre-making: a dramaturge occupies a position somewhere around a specific production, that's ordinarily considered to be someone with 'oversight' and who is there for any kind of support. Yet the methods of one dramaturge can vary enormously from the next, the individual understanding of what dramaturgy is varies and this determines both the 'oversight' and the support this person can offer. Therefore, texts on dramaturgy are not seldom in the form of an interview with a dramaturge. Marianne van Kerkhoven has been so active as a writer, that an overview containing a number of her articles is published as a book. This book then reads as a book on dramaturgy, through the consistency of the ideas over time of a single dramaturge. This dramaturge aided us in developing our own understanding of dramaturgy. In my recollection, if there is one specific lesson taught during these classes, it is that there is no single definitive understanding of dramaturgy. I am interested in the dramaturgy of programming.

This means that I understand dramaturgy basically as a faculty producing meaning through establishing connections. In the perspective of programming theatre shows, dramaturgy means producing meaning through establishing connections between those shows, and their surrounding context. Since the programmer is the person that has the task of selecting these shows, he or she appears to be best outfitted to reflect on these connections and their meaning. Saying this, I am drawn immediately to the notion of the curator: the apparent equal of the theatre programmer in the visual arts. The curator selects artworks to be in an exposition, much like a theatre programmer selects shows to be in a program. But curatorial practice differs greatly from theatre programming in the Netherlands in the way it has integrated to a fair degree an exposure of its inner workings: part of the job of curating seems to be to openly reflect on what it *means* to select artworks and to present them as connected. Dramaturgy appears to be at work here. Much as with dramaturges, an audience is able to distinguish between different curators, who are known for their specific approaches. Hardly any theatre programmer is known in a same way and so 'their' dramaturgy

remains unexpressed. I consider this to be a lack, because every programmer potentially has the opportunity and space to add depth to the field of performing arts by reflecting on the conditions of 'their' specific presentation of a performance. My intention is to interrelate these three concepts – programming, curating, dramaturgy – in order to be able to discuss the dramaturgy of programming.

It is curious that there are educations in the Netherlands to become a curator and to become a dramaturge, but no education to become a programmer of theatre. Of course, no education is needed to become, in the end, whatever you want to be (and there are many more professions that aren't specifically educated) but in the perspective of my thesis it's significant: a specified education or course signals a heightened awareness of and curiosity for the inner diversities and distinctions of a profession.

In this thesis I want to focus on the connections between curator, dramaturge and programmer – or rather, I want to establish connections. For some obvious similarities already lay plain in sight: each of these professions is occupied with the arts, each is not considered to be primarily an artistic profession, and each of these professions is associated with a wide focus. Of course there are also obvious differences, some of which I will point attention to – briefly, like the issue of education: programming in the theatre may not be considered as something that can be 'taught' or researched, as curating or dramaturgy. My aim in establishing connections between curating, dramaturgy and programming is to try and enrich discourse around the last: in my opinion, the attention already awarded to the first two is now due for programming too. I will create another frame through which to view programming, itself already a framing profession.

For it strikes me that such a crucial position, a decisive element at the basis of presenting theatre is so poorly articulated – at least in comparison with curating, its peer in visual arts. Curating has been the subject of many interview series, books, congresses and (academic) studies. Many individual professionals active in curating, as well as in dramaturgy, have published their personal views on these subjects. Apart from an interview series in Dutch theatre magazine *Theatermaker* a few years ago, there is no comparable discourse around programming in Dutch theatre as there is around dramaturgy or (international) curating. In this thesis, I aim to shed light on why that is so. As I will show, there are no fundamental differences that inhibit a deepened

understanding and activation of programming, similar as with curating and I will use a dramaturgical perspective to further strengthen these similarities.

I've divided my thesis into two parts. The first part contains the theoretical preparations for the second part – because there is little theoretical material available for studying programming in theatre, I'll borrow from other disciplines in order to be able to make statements. These will determine the second part.

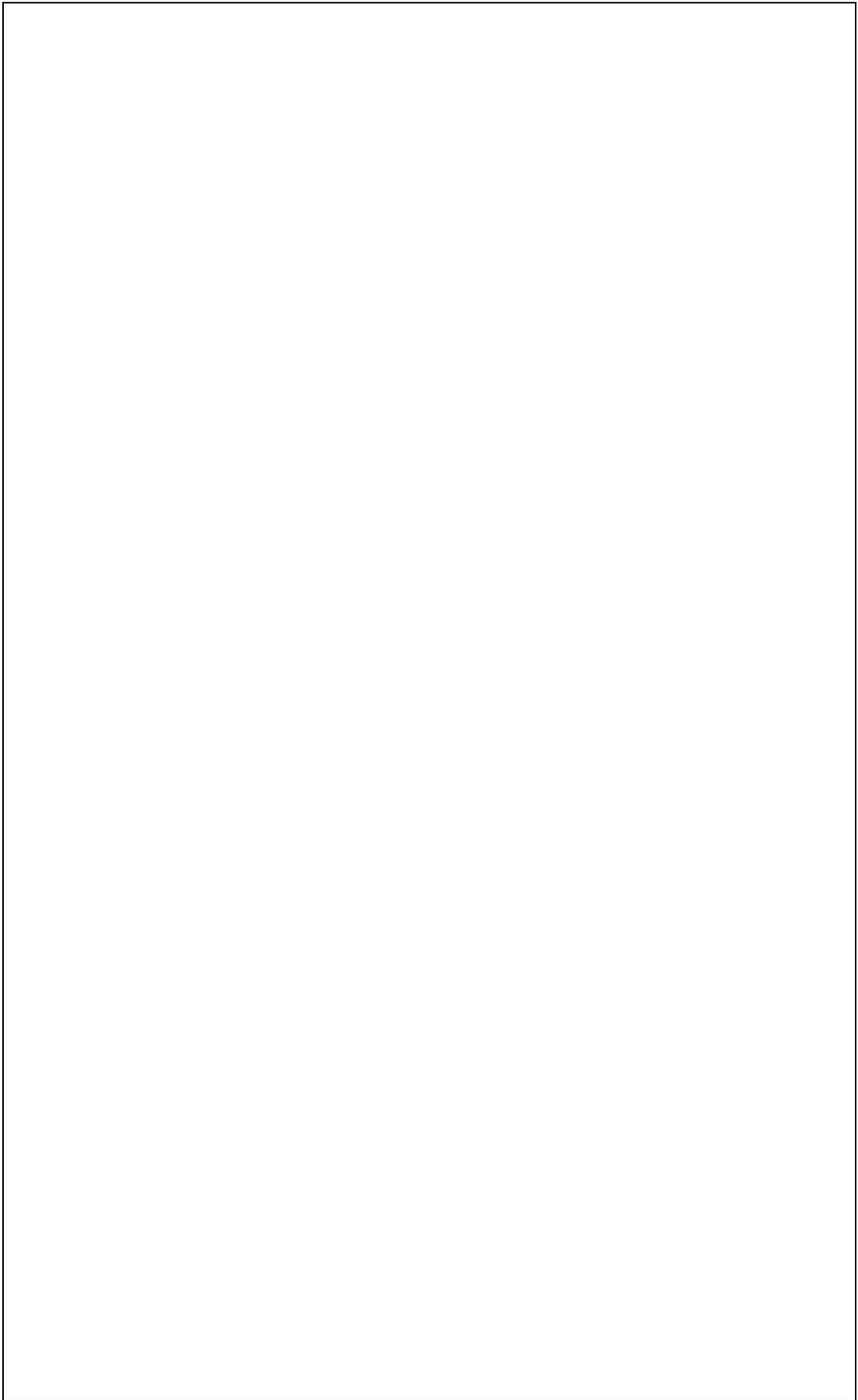
For a theoretical framework I will turn to Maaïke Bleeker's notion of visuality in the theatre. Bleeker's study is concerned with *'the complexity of what is easily, but mistakenly, taken for granted as 'just looking'*¹. In her book she sets out to demonstrate how cultured modes of looking are active as vision 'takes place' with the theatre as its subject. From this book, *Visuality in the Theatre, the locus of looking*, I will use a few concepts that will aid in the articulation of the programmer's position as both visible and powerful. I will also discuss the emergence of the modern curator in history using these concepts.

This historical emergence I gather mostly from Hans Ulrich Obrist's book, *A Brief History of Curating*. Obrist is a renowned contemporary curator and for this book he interviewed his 'professional parents': the curators from the generation that revolutionized the curatorial practice before him. Much can be learned from reading their reflections on transforming a visual arts practice that used to be somewhat similar to how the practice of programming theatre is now: a presentation of artworks, apparently selected by the institution, as a 'true-to-life' perspective on an arts field. Through these reflections, and a few landmark figures, curating has become a vibrant, personal, eclectic and widespread field of activity – something that cannot be said of programming theatre in the Netherlands. I have conducted 11 interviews with professionals in the field of programming Dutch theatre and I've found that programming is generally considered as a serving, fixed position with little space for a specific profile and dialogue.

As I mentioned, one of my tools in reframing the practice of theatre programming will be dramaturgy – I will use Marianne van Kerkhoven's book *Van het Kijken en Van het Schrijven ('on watching and on writing')* to formulate a perspective on dramaturgy – because what I propose is a practice of programming that is informed by dramaturgy. Seen this way, the subject of this thesis can be understood as *the dramaturgy of programming*. This concept properly formulates my interest; I don't want to suggest

that curating as a concept can be seamlessly transplanted from the visual arts sphere into theatre programming. Finally, since this thesis focuses exclusively on programming theatre in the *Netherlands*, from here on when I speak of theatre programming, I refer only to Dutch theatre.

Programming theatre in the Netherlands can prosper from the same ideas and intentions that shaped the modern curatorial practice and can utilize dramaturgy as a tool in doing so. In the near future, an 'emancipated' practice of programming may emerge that both enriches the field of performance and inspires reception of performance by an audience. For in the current situation, I criticize the lack of responsibility on the part of programmers, by not articulating their position and profile well enough and so miss out on a chance to add to the production of meaning of a specific show or shows. Theatre programmers are, in a way, in the same position as curators, yet don't act in the same way. There's territory to be won here.



Living is easy with eyes closed, it's understanding all you see

The Beatles

PART 1



1-1. vision taking place

Visuality, in short, focuses on the relationship between what is seen and who does the seeing. It's a critical study of vision, mainly directed against the misconception that what one sees, an observation, exists independent of the one seeing, the observer. Visual analysis aims to clarify the relationality active in vision as a dynamic process between what is presented and to who.

Maaïke Bleeker, in *Visuality in the Theatre, the Locus of Looking*, notes that while visual analysis is today practiced in many different domains of cultural study, there's remarkably little interest in visual analysis in theatre studies and the other way around, interdisciplinary visual analysis hardly focuses on theatre. Theatre appears to be such an ideal subject for studying visuality: the relationality between viewer and viewed is hardly anywhere more obviously staged than in a theatre performance. In her book Bleeker reflects on the gap in attention for visual analysis in the theatre and intends to fill it. Since I am also concerned with what in my view is a gap in attention, I want to start my argument alongside Bleeker's and introduce a few concepts from her book that will prove useful for my thesis.

Bleeker wonders if the very obviousness of the theatrical situation as a means of staging the relationality between viewer and viewed is responsible for the lack of study of visuality in the theatre. This obviousness has been anxiously shielded from critical study by rendering it irrelevant, negatively connoting it as theatricality in (dramatic) history. A 'theatrical' situation would be a scene that is too obvious, too poorly constructed to conceal the relation it stages between what's (re-)presented and its viewer – as opposed to a scene that successfully masks its construction and is taken in by a viewer as natural or real. Bleeker also comments on the 'scopic regime' in (postdramatic) modernity, reinstating an illusion of realness by focusing on presence, again obscuring the relationality immanent in vision. In either situation, theatricality is the repressed other of reality, as the scenario in which there's 'failure' to convince a spectator of the autonomy of a spectacle. In other words, a (re-)presentation that doesn't succeed in coming across as existing independent from whoever is present to see it, is discarded as being false – and the theatre is here used as the reference to falsehood.

In this repressed, negatively connoted sphere Bleeker's argument starts. Visuality is a means to focus on just the relationality at work in vision 'taking place': Bleeker argues

against the notion of a 'disembodied eye/l' that takes in what is presented to it as if severed from a specific subject doing the viewing, and instead returns this viewing activity to a specific subject – an embodied *locus of looking* – in its relationship to a subject viewed. This relationship is what matters, this is the subject of visuality (visuality precisely doesn't exist, Bleeker says, outside this relationality).

With a reference to medical science, Bleeker proposes to dissect visuality: dissection has become

the model of scientific investigation as a practice concerned with producing objective visions of the world 'as it is'. Visions, that is, cut loose from the subjective point of view of a particular observer. ²

Bleeker aims to undo this claimed objectivity inherent in vision, apparently enabling the viewer to just see 'what is over there' as it is in itself. Instead she wonders

How to conceive of 'just looking' as a necessarily impure and always synaesthetic event that takes place in a body as the locus of intertwining of various perceptual systems? ³

Three things mentioned in this short quote are essential to understanding Bleeker's notion of visuality in the theatre: the 'necessarily impure' relates to the impossibility of the thing observed appearing *as it is* in itself, the 'synaesthetic event' underlines the interaction between viewer and viewed, *creating* an image, and the 'body as locus' points to the actual point of reference of any observation: the organism that does the looking – which is a complex of intertwined systems. These notions all aim to shed light on who's been kept in the dark, literally in the auditorium and figuratively in discourse, the spectator (observer) and his role in the construction of vision.

Two references of Bleeker are worth noticing here: Jonathan Crary and his notion of 'managing attention' and Barbara Freedman's notion of 'constructions of the real'. Through Crary, Bleeker reflects on the 'modern fable' of true and objective vision, made possible by a clever staging of the (close) relationship between viewer and viewed, apparently erasing this relationship. Freedman is mentioned because of her analysis of how (Elizabethan) theatre is constructed to respond to a historically determined spectator consciousness, similar to how reality is in fact constructed. In both references, the theatre operates as a paradigmatic example through which a naturalized, subjective-cloaked-as-objective vision can be discerned. By studying these

visions through visual analysis, one can gain insight into formerly hidden constructions, both in the theatre and the social reality that shaped it.

Disorders that Consciousness can produce, a text by Bleeker first published in *Bodycheck: Relocating the Body in Contemporary Performing Art* in volume 17 of *Critical Studies* (2002) is also included, slightly edited, in her book *Visuality in the Theatre*. Yet in this 2002 text are a few lines I want to point attention to here. In her introduction, Bleeker comments on Martin Jay's notion of the pictorial turn, intertwining with and succeeding the linguistic turn and similarly attending 'to the constituted rather than the found quality of seemingly "natural" phenomena'. And she refers to Stephen Melville in her approach to theorizing about the 'conspicuously absent' spectator bodies through a *critique of vision*: 'a systematic suspicion of the apparent transparency and naturalness of vision'. She writes:

*'Just looking' appears to be far more complicated than the expression might first suggest. Seeing appears to be irrational, inconsistent, and undependable. (...) Ways of seeing are historically determined and culturally mediated. More than that, seeing appears to alter the thing seen and to transform the seer. Not only are words and images intertwined in many ways, but so too are the seer and the seen.*⁴

What is also important is the process of *denaturalization*, revealing certain deep structures to be constructions of a certain time for a certain purpose – rather than being 'just there' outside of reach. Later on in Bleeker's text, Mieke Bal is mentioned. In a move somewhat similar like my own later on, Bleeker adapts Bal's museal theory in her argument on theatre:

*In an act of exposure, something is made public, and, according to Bal, this involves making public the deepest held views and beliefs of a subject. Exposition, therefore, is always also an argument. In publicizing these views, the subject exposes himself as much as the object. 'Such exposure is an act of producing meaning, a performance'. This performative character of exposure, however, remains hidden in the typical constative gesture of exposure of the museum saying 'this is how it is'.*⁵

In short, it means that everything that's presented, is presented by someone from a specific position. No argument, no presentation, exhibition or program can be made,

independent from a subjective position – and the before mentioned critique of vision helps to denaturalize the assumption that it can.

Then, how to begin looking at *not* ‘just looking’? To return to Bleeker’s book *Visuality in the Theatre*: she proposes, following earlier discourse, to take *perspective* as a starting point for examining the vision implied in a specific (re-)presentation. Perspective is perhaps most known as a term – seemingly harmless – from the visual arts, used for the analysis of the layout or setup of an image. But in modern discourse it has attained numerous other meanings. It’s relevant for the study of *visuality* for the status it’s been awarded as offering the position from which things can be ‘seen as they are’. For instance, in the example of an image, a correct perspectival drawing would offer a glance at the world as we know it, that is, as if we see it with our own eyes. In discourse it means that if you get the right ‘perspective on things’, you’d be able to grasp the truth of things.

Bleeker doesn’t deny the existence of perspective nor does she join the theoreticians that claim that by deconstructing perspective one can get past it. Instead she develops a quite instrumental use for perspective: studying it might help

*Understanding how our senses are cultured to perceive certain privileged modes of representation as more natural, real, objective, or convincing than others, and to relate these effects to the discourses which mediate in what we think we see.*⁶

A tool Bleeker proposes to use is *focalization*: it aims to clarify the relation between what is shown and from where it is seen by focusing on precisely how the image presented responds to a specific audience ‘*marked by particular presuppositions, experiences, fears and desires*’. An analysis in terms of focalization directs attention to the dynamic of reception, rather than understanding it in terms of a ‘successful’ perspective or theatrical ‘fakery’. Where Bleeker discusses specific performances (for instance William Forsythe’s *Artifact*) she gives the example of an *internal focalizer*: a character on stage that, through its presence and actions, directs the gaze of the audience towards the construction of vision. This character acts as a focalization point inside the theatrical structure, openly mediating the spectators’ vision and ‘standing in’ for their consciousness of the dynamic of vision. I will return to this model of the internal focalizer in later chapters when I discuss the actual functions of curator and programmer.

Bleeker returns to Bal here for stressing the consequences of overlooking the construction of perspective. There's some word play: perspective as a concept, is a metaphor replacing a story. A story is told from a subjective point of view. A concept acts as its metaphor, but in this move the subjective point of view is usually lost. A concept thus structures thought, no longer visibly from a subjective point of view. Perspective, Bleeker says, is such a concept. It is '*informing perception rather than corresponding to it*' – we don't recognize perspective as what we see with our own eyes, but we recognize what we see because of the *concept* perspective in our heads: '*as a regulatory structure, it's sometimes in operation precisely where one least expects it, where intervention is least visible.*' So again referring to the quote from Mieke Bal earlier, it's actually imperative to be critical when studying vision; how can you see that what you see isn't what you see? It's because certain constructions root deeper than what first meets the eye and by focusing on these constructions one can shed light both on how we perceive things and how they are presented to us in a response to that. To refrain from doing so will result in internalizing the dominant mode of perception – or rather: continuing its dominance – and one will see things either as 'natural' or 'wrong'.

Perspective mediates in our vision. Vision is mediated. We do not have direct access to what we see 'over there' but as Bleeker shows, an observation attains its impact in the way it corresponds to how we're 'cultured to perceive'. We see as we're trained to see, to say it bluntly. In order to clarify this procedure of mediation, Bleeker introduces three subjects that must be considered separately: first is the subject *seen*, second is the subject doing the *seeing* and third the positions of *subject of vision* that is mediating between the two. So as a simplified model replacing the illusion of direct access, an observation can be better sketched as a 'meeting in the middle': this middle ground is both determined by the presuppositions of the subject seeing as by the characteristics of the subject seen – the move towards each other can be described by the subject position taken up. This does not mean, Bleeker underlines, that taking up a subject position implied by the image is similar to 'believing in it': it means that one always stays conscious of the shared responsibility for vision taking place, regardless of one agrees or not.

The last three points in Bleeker's texts I've discussed will prove instrumental for my further argument: the critique of vision, perspective/focalization and the three subjects of vision. I will make Bleeker's theory of visuality in the theatre as mentioned here

productive for my research into the dramaturgy of programming as it helps to confront some of the fixities in the practice of programming that I came across.

1-2. curatorial practice

The curator is usually associated with the museum or the presentation of visual art. Its task can be understood as the caretaker of a collection – a preserver – or, in a more contemporary understanding, as the designer of exhibitions. This last job description was founded by perhaps the most influential curator of the modern age; Harald Szeemann. In a move symbolic of the development of curatorial practice in the last few decades, Szeemann declared his independence of any institution in 1969 and became a model for the *independent curator*. In fact, Szeemann would later go on to occupy a position at the Kunsthaus Zürich for many years (as a *permanent freelancer*) but a movement was started that sparked discourse around curatorial practice and engendered some fundamental perspectives on the presentation of art. I will now briefly introduce some key concepts of this development of curatorial practice for they'll prove useful in my later comparison to the practice of programming theatre.

The twentieth century saw the arrival of abstract art, sometimes referred to as autonomous art. This last term implies the autonomous existence of the artwork, abstracted from any reference to or representation of 'our world' – a notion that recalls the seeming naturalness in vision of the previous chapter. Through severing its ties with the world as we see it, the artwork also lost the status as a representation it may have had before then and, as Boris Groys describes in *Art Power* (2008), '*the avant-garde staged a martyrdom of the image*':

The avant-garde put traditional painting through all sorts of torture, which recall first and foremost the torture to which saints were subjected as depicted in paintings in the Middle Ages. Thus the image is – symbolically and literally – sawed, cut, fragmented, drilled, pierced, dragged through the dirt, and left to the mercy of ridicule. ⁷

These are all strategies to isolate the artwork, to remove any visible relation to a subject from sight – a move that is utterly iconoclastic, Groys explains: the status of the artwork is openly destroyed, so that a spectator may have the illusion of being able to approach it unhindered by any values the artwork used to symbolize. Though, a curious side effect of this was that the abstract, autonomous art needed more explanation for an audience to relate to than before. Traditionally this explaining was the task of the curator, caretaking of and selecting the artworks in the museum. Yet since now there was an open demand for presenting the artwork 'as it is' through

iconoclasm, it was thought that the intervention of a curator hinders the spectators' approach to the artwork. This would mean double iconoclasm; negative iconoclasm! Groys (himself also a curator) objects, in a most peculiar way. He argues that curating in fact is iconophile – *curing* the image; that the artwork *needs* its presentation in order to become visible; it is in itself not powerful enough to appear:

It lacks the necessary vitality, energy, and health. Artworks seem to be genuinely sick and helpless – the spectator has to be led to the artwork, as hospital workers might take a visitor to see a bedridden patient. ⁸

This last remark, albeit in rather negative terms, points to the necessity of an intensified dynamic between the artwork and the curator, in order to make proper reception possible – at least of the abstract modern art of the past century. *From practice to discourse*; as Paul O'Neill describes this 'curatorial turn' in an article with the same title (2009):

During the 1960s the primary discourse around art-in-exhibition began to turn away from forms of critique of the artwork as autonomous object of study/critique towards a form of curatorial criticism, in which the space of exhibition was given precedence over that of the objects of art. ⁹

Roughly from that time on, modern self-reflexive curatorship took shape, up to now. This period and its developments are determined by a group of individual curators and their respective careers, as is reflected in Hans Ulrich Obrist's book *A Brief History of Curating* (2009). Obrist is a contemporary curator and in a study of his practice he interviewed his 'professional parents': eleven interviews with curators that shaped the modern practice of curatorship. All of these eleven influential curators were active in the period described above from the start. There are many interesting comments on the practice of curating in the book, two of which I'll pay more attention to here.

The first comes from Seth Siegelaub, an American curator best known for his work in conceptual art. Both in an interview with Paul O'Neill (*Action Man*, 2006) as in *A Brief History of Curating* he makes more or less the same observation about curatorial practice in his generation: how the role of the curator was demystified. In *A Brief History of Curating* he says:

Before, the curator was someone who somehow determined and rewarded artistic genius. He (or she) may have been a great writer, catalogue maker, or builder of

great collections, but this role was never asserted as a clear force. They were certainly powerful – but only within the context of some greater institutional power – and their job was to select “great artists” and be the voice of the gods, or of “quality” and correct art values. I think our problem in the area of curatorship was to become aware that this person – in this case me – was an actor in this process, and that he or she had an effect on what was shown; and being aware of this was part of looking at art and understanding how art choices were made [...] How to make these hidden choices more visible, how to make this dimension behind the public art exhibition and selection process more visible, was in part what I and others were thinking about. ¹⁰

The last sentence underlines remarkably well the demand, originated from the curatorial turn, to verbalize and incorporate the actions of the curator in the process of presenting art. Artworks can no longer appear as they are in themselves – as they actually never could – and some intervention, at least through selection and presentation, is unavoidable. According to Siegelau, one is then faced with the responsibility to bring this reality to light – to demystify the practice of selecting and contextualizing artworks done by curators. This can be seen in light of the same ambiguity of iconoclasm and iconophilia before mentioned.

The other noteworthy observation comes from Johannes Cladders, as longtime director/curator of the City Museum in Monchengladbach a key figure in European modern art. About his own role he states:

I have always believed that it is the artist who creates a work, but a society that turns it into a work of art, an idea that is already in Duchamp and a lot of other places. In most cases, museums have failed to see the consequences of this notion. I have always considered myself to be a “co-producer” of art. Now, do not misunderstand me. I do not mean this in the sense of dictating to an artist [...] but rather in the sense of participating as a museum – as a mediating institution – in the process that transforms a work into a work of art. So it was always clear to me that I did not need to do anything for works already declared art by common sense. ¹¹

And later:

We finally have to stop defining art as only those objects that have been accepted as art by society. We have to concentrate on allowing art to evolve through how it is received. ¹²

What speaks from these quotes is the awareness of the shared responsibility of artist and curator for the actual production of meaning of art in the public sphere. The fact that Cladders so consciously points to the museum as the exhibition space *mediating* between artwork and audience and in the process *transforms* ‘works’ (of art) into artworks, reveals the same belief in demystification as seen with Siegelau by opening up space for discourse.

The powerful effect of this move – the curatorial turn – is further illustrated by O’Neill in his article as he quotes Bourdieu to point to the ‘*added cultural meaning and value to the making of art*’ through curatorial practice:

The subject of the production of the artwork – of its value but also of its meaning – is not the producer who actually creates the object in its materiality, but rather the entire set of agents engaged in the field. Among these are the producers of works, classified as artists, critics of all persuasions, collectors, middlemen, curators, etc.; in short, all those who have ties in art, [...] participate in the production of the value of the artist and of art. ¹³

To conclude my look at the history of modern curatorship before I turn to some contemporary views, I’ll return shortly to Boris Groys. In *Art Power* he offers some insightful reflections of his own about the position of the curator in the history of modern art:

The curator can’t but place, contextualize, and narrativize works of art – which necessarily leads to their relativization. Thus modern art began to condemn curators, because the figure of the curator was perceived as the embodiment of dark, dangerous, iconoclastic side of exhibiting practice, as the destructive doppelganger of the artist who creates art by exhibiting it [...]. The public wishes to be confronted directly with individual artworks and exposed to their unmediated impact. The general public steadfastly believes in the autonomous meaning of the individual artwork, which is supposedly being manifested in front of its eyes. The curator’s every mediation is suspect: he is seen as someone standing between the artwork and its viewer, insidiously manipulating the viewer’s

perception with the intent of disempowering the public [...] the best curating is nil-curating, non-curating. ¹⁴

He later asks himself the important question:

Which is the right kind of curatorial practice? Since curatorial practice can never entirely conceal itself, the main objective of curating must be to visualize itself, by making its practice explicitly visible. The will to visualization is in fact what constitutes and drives art. Since it takes place within the context of art, curatorial practice cannot elude the logic of visibility. ¹⁵

What seems to return in all the comments above on modern curatorship is the sensibility to openly reflect on the own practice of curating, as it is a crucial part of the production of meaning in art. It's striking that there's already so much history documented about curatorship, implying an interest in and thus a positive evaluation of this history by practitioners. It appears to be a valuable source in the comparison of curating and programming theatre.

I would like to introduce here a collection of texts concerned with a contemporary take on curatorship. Interestingly these texts, bundled in no.55 of the Croatian theatre magazine *Frakcija*, are not explicitly related to visual arts practice. In fact, this magazine explores the potential of curatorship in the performing arts – closely related to what I'm doing. Recent times have seen a focus on interdisciplinarity in the arts and *performance art* itself is considered to be a hybrid operating on the meeting ground between the visual and performing arts, so in fact the exploration of a concept from one art discipline in another doesn't appear to be so exotic, but still the attention paid to presentational strategies is still marginal in theatre studies and practice. The writers of *Frakcija* are all currently active in diverse art practices and their communal efforts to widen the field of activity of curatorship heralds a growing need of implementing its deepened reflection and transparent motivations, mainly in the performing arts field. What's remarkable to read is that these writers, obviously from a different generation in art history than the curators in *A brief History of Curating*, still recall these same curators and use the specific historic developments to devise contemporary alternatives. *Frakcija* hints again at the positive evaluation of modern curatorship and at the same time at the education that probably resulted from this, continuing its merits. It thus serves as a great source for my analysis of contemporary takes on curatorship.

Florian Malzacher (a curator and one of the three editors of the edition of *Frakcija*), in his article *Cause & Result* first offers his own reflections on the emergence of the modern curator in the visual arts sphere 'at a time when artworks often no longer functioned without a context, refused to function without a context'. He notes a justified fear of artists for reduction and domestication by the curator on the one hand but also a misjudgment on their part of the way their work functions on the other:

Thus, good curatorial work would consist not in damaging the autonomous art work in its autonomy, but on the contrary, in reinforcing it, yet without considering it untouchable, too weak, needy of protection. [...] Contexts can offer artworks a proper reception – but they can also incapacitate them. ¹⁶

One reads an echo of Groys' terminology here! Malzacher goes on to point out obstructions to curating on both the artists' and presenter's side in the performing arts. He criticizes the 'lack of courage' of programmers to take up the responsibility or challenge to put the elements of a program into relation with each other: the excuse they give is regularly the 'sluggishness and temporal intensity' of the theatre as a result of which no audience is expected to read the dramaturgy of an entire program. On the other side, Malzacher criticizes the isolated view cultivated by artists on their work as standing exclusively on itself and the lack of interest in relating their work to that of others:

The singular work of art is – even if this is often denied for discursive reasons – still the prevailing model in practice. ¹⁷

What can be done? Malzacher observes that while budgets shrink, more and more schools deliver more and more theatre 'professionals' who are often:

Not needed, not wanted and not seldom simply not good enough to survive in the highly competitive market. The task of organizing this field, the task of playing the bad guy has been delegated: curating means excluding and this excluding has existential consequences for artists. (...) Curatorial work also means deciding clearly for oneself what is good and what is bad. And knowing why. ¹⁸

Not only does Malzacher here call upon programmers' responsibility to make clear, well-established decisions but with a simple statement he reverses the model of selection from inclusivity to exclusivity. In fact, nothing changes in the reality of programming but by this clever reversal the need to explain choices seems to have

increased: negative selection criteria face a greater resistance than positive criteria. I don't believe it means that curatorial discourse should focus on these negative criteria but that we need to focus on the reality that a much greater amount of performances is *not* shown than what *is*. The shift of attention from a 'safe' inclusive perspective to a 'hostile' exclusive perspective primarily calls for better articulation – for what's at stake has been given a more prominent position.

Another remarkable text in *Frakcija* comes from Beatrice von Bismarck, art historian and professor in Leipzig. Her text, *Relations in Motion*, focuses mainly on the flexible conditions of curatorial practice. She also comments on the origin of modern curatorial practice – in clear terminology she writes about the already mentioned generation of curators that:

They set up their own directives as alternatives to the hitherto common criteria of curatorial practice, displaying them as conventions that could likewise be changed, and proclaimed the exhibition space as such to be an integral part of artistic involvement. The decisions that were essential to the visibility of art and its diverse forms, and the positions from which they were made, as well as the criteria on which they were based and the included modes of addressing, were at the disposal – of various agents – for shaping and integrating them into the context-related procedures. ¹⁹

Von Bismarck underlines the relationality and self-reflexivity involved in presenting modern art. What she adds to the argument here, is a focus on the temporal aspect of curating, so essential to the performing arts as well. The contexts von Bismarck speaks of must be understood as created and enforced, by the curator, for the limited time span in which an artwork is presented. This liberates curatorial activity from the demand of objectivity, the claim of universality that Seth Siegelaub referred to in the quote earlier. A curator's work is always '*in the state of becoming*', severing and fusing connections between an artwork and its surroundings:

What has established itself here is the figure of a manager of information, objects, spaces, finances, and people whose work consists of creating constellations and whose manifold product can be described as a "set". The notion of set combines things that are – for a particular period of time – considered as belonging together, with associations to the sphere of theatre and film, in which it denotes the scene that has been put up in the form of a stage or a film set. [...]

Curatorial activity appears as a cultural practice that runs across and permeates disciplines and professions, which is located somewhere between the fields of research and art, as it is related to them both and shaped by their agents.

From this position, von Bismarck proposes, curating attains meaning in a particular context, at a specific point in discourse and the curatorial 'product' can always be formulated anew because of its flexible position *in-between*. This understanding of curating seems to harmonize with the transitory character of the theatre, and at the same time invites a cross-reading with Marianne van Kerkhoven's understanding of the dramaturge, to which I will return later.

1-3. **visuality and curatorial practice**

How can the developments in the recent history of curating be related to the notion of visuality I've discussed earlier? In general, curatorial practice is concerned with *presenting*, displaying something in a certain light – as visual study too is focusing on particular presentations. A more specific similarity between both discourses is the emphasis on the *positions* involved in presentation, in vision – reception. As I've tried to demonstrate, visuality and curatorship each focus on the specificity of certain visions and, at the same time, work to offer insight into this specificity. I'll now reflect further on how visuality and curatorship relate, in order to create a strong theoretical frame to fit programming into later.

What strikes me first is the concept of focalization as noted by Bleeker, and that I see return in for instance Florian Malzacher's thoughts on curatorship. When he focuses on exclusion rather than on inclusion, and calls for courage to visualize the dramaturgy of a program by exposing the decisions that lie behind it, in fact he describes a process somewhat similar to a visual analysis in terms of focalization. To recall shortly what was said; focalization is about directing attention towards the dynamic of reception, working against the binary opposition of true and false. It aims to undo a 'general' perspective, and underlines the specificity in sight.

What's been hailed in nearly all accounts of the curators in the previous chapter, is the distinctive position of the curator. S/he is described as a figure via which reception of an artwork is channeled in a most specific way – or at least, should be. The presence of a curator itself signals a dialogue, implies a tempered approach to an artwork. This presence has a twofold result: it immediately positions the reception of an artwork in a highly specific context, for a spectator is aware of the fact that someone chose to present the artwork in a certain manner and at the same time a dialogue, not necessarily explicit, is started between the spectator and the 'presenter'. Of course, the curator never even nearly comes close to become the 'author' of the artwork (this should never be an aim) but, as Bourdieu's quote in the previous chapter reflects, a curator does add to the production of *cultural meaning* – and is held accountable for this. By his or her presence, functioning almost as an 'internal focalizer' (Bleeker), the curator sparks the dynamic of the reception of art – not in the least since a spectator can perhaps relate to, or (dis)agree with, another person more easily than with an artwork.

Also, the apparent 'naturalness of vision' neutralized/cancelled by Bleeker is reflected especially in the quotes from Boris Groys' text. In his driving rhetoric, Groys describes the uneasiness of both artists and audience with the curator's mediation. Artists want their artworks to be presented as they are and an audience wants to be exposed to the artwork as it is. Yet, as Groys describes, the unmediated presentation of an artwork is both unwanted and impossible: unwanted since (post-)modern abstract art hardly functions outside a context and impossible since artworks cannot present themselves as they 'lack the necessary vitality'. Modern art cannot go without a curatorial effort and thus cannot go without mediation. The best thing to do, says Groys, is to not neglect this and visualize the mediating component.

There's a strong correlation between Groys' argument and Bleeker's discussion of perspective as a regulatory structure. Since curators and their activity are so scorned or suspected by both artists and audience in history, curatorship has been removed from sight. Following Groys, curatorial activity cannot disappear, so without its visibility, becoming somewhat like a hidden practice it's escaped the reach of many involved in art. This is not a good place for curatorship, says Groys amongst others in the previous chapter, like Bleeker warns us of the unhindered functioning of perspective as a metaphor replacing a story, hidden from our awareness. Bleeker and Groys both claim for their own argument that one cannot go outside perspective or curating; that one *should* be aware of its working and its construction in time and person. What can be read here is a shared focus on transparency, on the installation of a consciousness of perspective and curating that can lead to greater interaction with and understanding of the thing presented. Any way, keeping processes hidden leads to reduced perceptibility, even if things appear as they are 'in themselves'. The naturalness of certain visions (in art) must be criticized, both Bleeker and Groys claim, and the last proposes to embody this critique by a curator.

Finally, the subject position mediating in vision as described by Bleeker almost literally returns in Cladders' quote when he speaks of the museum that transforms a work into a work of art. Cladders views the museum as a co-producer of art, mediating in the meaning production of an (art)work. The insight offered by this quote is the recognition of the meaningful context created by the presentation, in turn created by a person (in the name of an institution). This context stands in for the apparent 'direct access' to the work, mediating in its meaning and thus transforming it into a work of *art* – according to Cladders.

The 'introduction of a third party' in the dynamic between audience and artwork corresponds to the three subject positions described by Bleeker. 'Just looking' is here problematized as 'just looking at artworks'. Not only does Cladders point to the responsibility of art presenters (museums) to be co-producers of the meaning of an artwork, but he also specifies the *transformative* quality inherent in this co-production: museums can do little for works that are already proclaimed as artworks since there no longer is a need to create a specific context in which to present these – we already recognize them as artworks. We can compare this distinction and the transformation with Bleeker's quote that 'perspective informs perception rather than corresponding to it'. A perspective is no neutral concept, rather: a concept is never neutral and perspective is a concept. So the perspective informing perception transforms what we see, even though we may not be aware of this and imagine to 'just' see what is there to be seen. Consciousness of the mediation and its transformative qualities though, helps actually to get a better 'perspective on things' and both Cladders and Bleeker imply this.

I've tried to explain certain developments of modern curatorship here in terms of visual analysis in order to evaluate its merits. In order to move towards theatre and the eventual analysis of the practice of programming theatre in part II, I will bring one more discourse into the constellation of this research: dramaturgy. Since I understand curating to be a mode of programming informed by dramaturgy, I'd like to investigate the field of dramaturgy to see how I can relate it to the notions of curating and visuality. I will do this through the accounts of one of the most influential dramaturges in recent European theatre, Marianne van Kerkhoven.

1-4. what's dramaturgy got to do with it?

Van het Kijken en van het Schrijven – 'on Watching and on Writing' is the title of a collection of articles by Marianne van Kerkhoven, a Flemish dramaturge at many different productions and for many different artists. The articles reflect a career that spans over 20 years, mainly spent at Brussels' Kaaaitheater: a building housing studios and a theatre that proved to be a key location for developments in European theatre and also for the presentation of theatre from further abroad. As a 'permanent resident', dramaturge van Kerkhoven collaborated with many groups and makers in Brussels and herself traveled a great deal as well. Texts and speeches of hers continue to be references in a European theatre discourse and are, for some part, reflected in the book '*On Watching and on Writing*'. Since the book is entirely written in Dutch, I'm making my own translations of titles and quotes from here on.

The reason for me to so intensively borrow from van Kerkhoven's book for engaging dramaturgy in the course of this research is mainly the rich history of her practice. But the fact that this history is documented, by herself, is of course essential: there are many more dramaturges that have exuded great influence on modern theatre, but among her peers, van Kerkhoven has been especially active in writing. She has reflected on her practice, the state of the world that practice is situated in and this has resulted in a book that is not surrounded by many more like it. This makes it a valuable source – Marten Spangberg, a choreograph and critic, calls in *Frakcija* for the engagement of young artists with writing as a fundamental asset to their practice: '*remember it is those who write history who decide what is important [...] publishing is a means, and a good one, to claim territory*'²⁰. In this case, it has supplied others and me with a good, single source on dramaturgy. Van Kerkhoven is also mentioned several times in this 2010 issue of *Frakcija*, signaling her influence to this day.

There are two reasons to introduce dramaturgy into the research here. The first is to create a triangle as a constellation in which to place, eventually, the programmer of theatre: I've described a practice of curatorship that originates in another art discipline and now I'd like to describe a practice of dramaturgy that operates in the same discipline as programming. This way I hope to be able to make a more thorough statement about programming – by approaching it from two sides, as it were. The second reason is that there are some striking correspondences between both discourses, some of which I'll go into in more detail now.

A concept of van Kerkhoven that's very helpful in trying to locate the dramaturgy in programming is the distinction between 'big' and 'small' dramaturgy: small being the dramaturgical work demanded in the production process of a specific performance and big dramaturgy being the plane for reflection on the position of art (the artwork) in the world it's located in. Of course, it's no clear distinction; big and small dramaturgies mutually influence one another and overflow. But as a conceptual distinction it's useful to separate the focus on the specific content of a performance on the one hand from the focus on its position in a larger frame on the other hand. My focus is on the last.

In her text *On the big and the small Dramaturgy* van Kerkhoven articulates this distinction: she emphasizes the need for embedding artworks in a social reality, in a way that recalls Groys and Cladders. Like Groys, van Kerkhoven responds to a negative attitude (in this case towards dramaturgy) that proposes the eradication of the dramaturge from the process of making theatre – on the account of being a redundant bother. The dramaturge's 'every mediation is suspect': here because dramaturgy supposedly presses down on the artwork with the weight of intellectualism. Van Kerkhoven responds fiercely to the accusations. Not only does she point to the presence of some form of 'small' dramaturgy in almost any art discipline – underlining its vital functions – but she also refers to the capacity of 'big' dramaturgies to help position the artwork in our social reality:

Today the performing arts sector is inscribed more and more into a commercial context of consumption, in which image building, advertisement, and so on, outweigh the artistic project, the honest intentions or the political voice of the artists. Nearly all texts we receive today from theaters are promotional, self-legitimizing messages; texts that reflect a thorough dramaturgy disappear more and more from the scene. [...] Now more than ever the world needs careful articulation of perspectives, awareness of existing paradoxes and discrepancies, another look at reality. Artists can help us read the world, decode its complexities. One of the tools at their disposal is to use dramaturgy in every form it comes. ²¹

Van Kerkhoven goes on to describe the dramaturge literally as the intermediary, the connecting link between the artist or the artwork and the surrounding world – able to establish more and better contact between the two. Van Kerkhoven doesn't go as far as Groys in saying that the artwork (performance) is *incapable* of presenting itself, but she does stress the importance of some 'guidance' in the crossing from the arts sphere

to the public. Noteworthy here is that van Kerkhoven, like for instance von Bismarck, is convinced that this guidance is a project constantly changing; that the work of the dramaturge in contextualizing an artwork is flexible and 'in the state of becoming'. Again, like earlier discussed in relation to curatorship, this liberates dramaturgy from the negative assumptions: there is no fixed procedure to be criticized, no predetermined strategy of dramaturgy that should be dismantled. Rather the work of a dramaturge in the big dramaturgy is constantly adjusting to both the conditions of the artwork and the specific state of the times. Much like the curator does, although the discipline may differ and the demands of the presentational sphere, the dramaturge in van Kerkhoven's description works to add to the production of cultural meaning of an artwork. The way of doing this is by establishing relations, constructing a platform for a possible meeting between artwork and audience – somewhat like Bleeker's description of the subject position and von Bismarck's reference to a stage 'set'.

A further similarity in term usage is read in another text of van Kerkhoven, *the Theatre lies in the City and the City lies in the World and the Walls are made of Skin*. Here she also goes into the crucial 'in-between' position of the dramaturge and describes her work as building bridges, between theory and practice, art and science, and so on. This bridge builder, albeit a rather common term, is specifically recalled numerous times by Hans Ulrich Obrist in his texts when he recalls Felix Feneon, an early French critic and curator greatly admired by Obrist. Throughout *A Brief History of Curating* the image of the 'pedestrian bridge' between audience and art often returns. To return to van Kerkhoven's response to the critique on the dramaturge above, she writes that if one is to do away with the dramaturge, one also destroys this bridge between science and art, theory and practice, artist and audience ²² – a separation of worlds (perhaps cloaked as a reduced distantness between them) that is, as I've demonstrated several times in this thesis, not preferable.

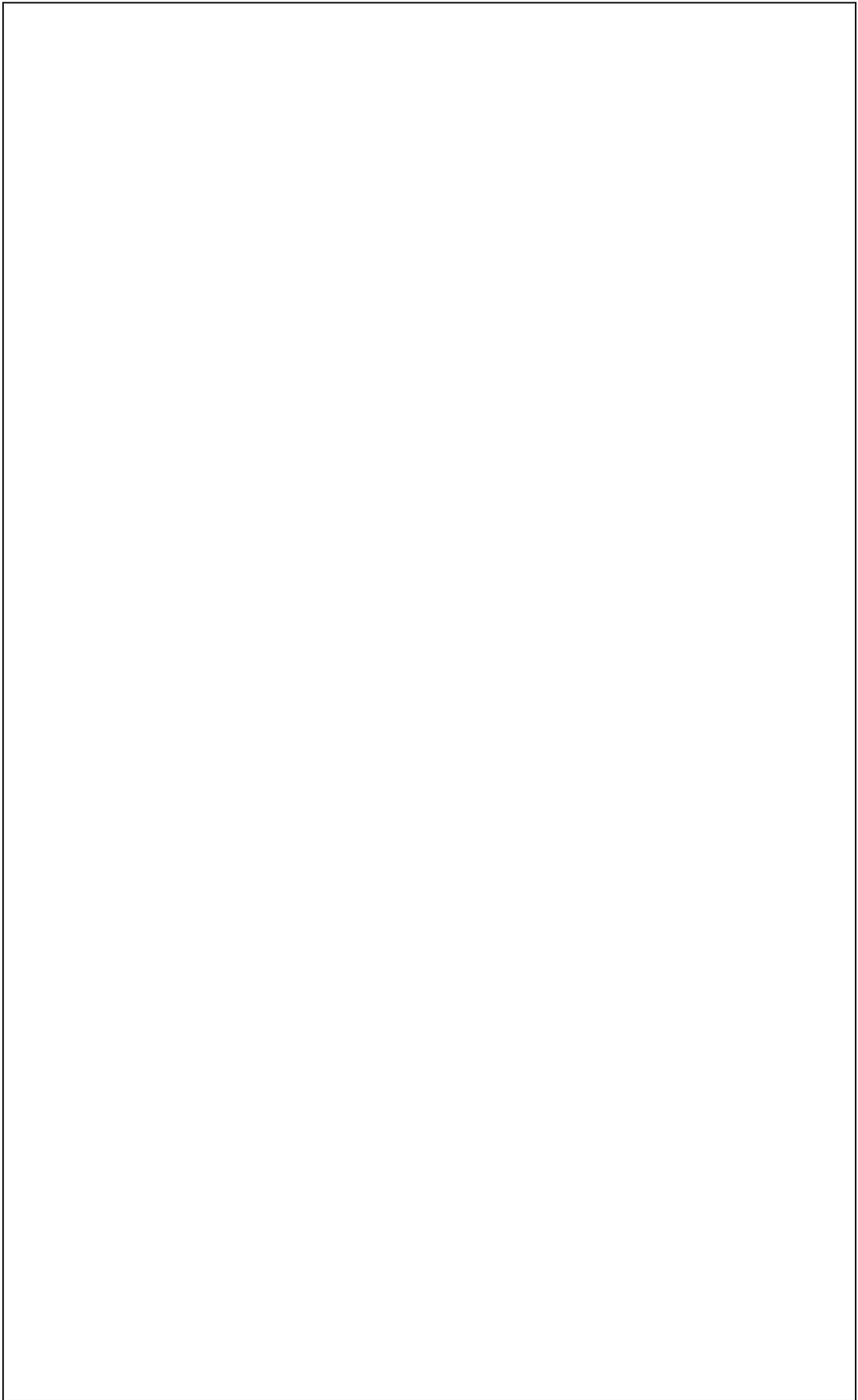
The in-between position of the dramaturge also brings into the discussion again the issue of visibility: the dramaturge cannot *not* be there, but appears to not be there. In other words, the dramaturge's work is invaluable, but invisible. This probably leads to the assumed redundancy of dramaturgy, much like the illusion of an unmediated encounter with the artwork discussed in chapter 1-2. Van Kerkhoven's isn't as explicit as some of the curators about the necessary visibility of curatorial/dramaturgical work – rather, she cautions every future dramaturge for being perpetually uncredited for his or her work – but this is stated in relation to what may be considered as small

dramaturgy. As the quote from *On the big and the small Dramaturgy* shows, she is quite explicit about the need for visible big dramaturgies, contextualizing art and the times. This means, first, that the responsibility to integrate open reflection into their practice is returned to the dramaturges. Second, it means that the role of the dramaturge in big dramaturgies is highly specific: van Kerkhoven sketches it as a paradoxical position that is embedded in concrete circumstances on the one hand yet is somewhat isolated on the other. The dramaturge, van Kerkhoven writes, doesn't really *fit in* with anything. The in-between position comes with a certain solitude and distantness, but, as the quote from Susan Sontag that opens *Watching without a pencil in hand* reflects, this distantness simultaneously implies the greatest interest. One can see how the curator returns in this description as well: a facilitator that is operative outside the direct artistic core but at the same time is responsible for a part of the cultural meaning of an artwork in social reality. It's an ambiguous position of being there and not being there at the same time – which in the end means: being there. Both Groys and van Kerkhoven argue that this presence cannot avoid visibility, or verbalization.

This leads to the last correspondence between the accounts of curatorship and dramaturgy discussed here: the self-reflexivity essential to both practices. Van Kerkhoven's text *Watching without a pencil in hand* itself reads as the prime example of this: 12 statements about the practice of dramaturgy originating in van Kerkhoven's own practice. The large amount of interviews or journals and diaries, bundled or not, on curatorship and dramaturgy imply the desire to capture the essence of these highly individualized practices. Obviously no-one dares to claim 'the method' on curating or doing dramaturgy, if it were at all existent, but still one can see the great urge to theorize about it. Again, this is also reflected in the Netherlands in the higher education in both curating and dramaturgy. These may all be considered results of what Paul 'O'Neill described as the move *from practice to discourse*: a turn away

...from forms of critique of the artwork as autonomous object of study/critique towards a form of curatorial criticism, in which the space of exhibition was given precedence over that of the objects of art.

To see how programmers reflect on their practice, I now want to move to part II of this thesis, in which I inventoried experiences of programmers in theatre.



For we are where we are/ Not

Jean-Pierre Jouve

PART 2



2-1. programmatic turn

The literature I've discussed up to now is on topics that surround my main interest. The argument is for transparency, self-reflexivity, awareness and articulation of the construction of a certain presentation. How to implement this knowledge into the programming practice that has produced no similar discourse as, for instance, curatorship? Of course, a lack of discourse doesn't necessarily imply a lack of investment from its professionals. In order to be able to produce some statements about the practice of programming, I've had many interviews with programmers in the Dutch field and found that some of them had developed very specific methods of their own, much like for instance Hans Ulrich Obrist's book on curators demonstrates. The only difference is that these methods aren't put into relation to each other as thoroughly as with curating. Programming has not become a field of analysis and discourse of its own. I argue for this field to emerge, for the 'emancipation' of the programmer: for a *programmatic turn*, so to say. The literature discussed in part 1 has led up to support the description of a practice of programming as I envision it. As I stated in the introduction to this thesis, I feel there's a lack of articulation by programmers of artistic standpoints and the choices that result from these and I want to confront the consequences of this lack. The conclusions of part 1 here function as a catalyst in the process of exploring the potential of a programming practice informed by dramaturgy, that fully utilizes its position. The critique of obscured functioning is now transformed into a plead for a new approach to programming.

To return to the question: how to implement knowledge from another field into one that hasn't yet developed a discursive basis? As I've discussed in chapter 1-1: how to begin seeing something that you're not aware of that it's there? Is the mere comparison to curatorial practice enough to produce new knowledge about programming? I've added dramaturgy to the comparison in order for programming to react to that and now it is time for a next step. That is the focus of this second part.

How can I think of a programmatic turn? First: it's a prognosis, foreshadowing changes in the practice of programming that are, as the term is a simple adjustment of the curatorial turn described by Paul 'O Neil, inspired by curatorial practice. A programmatic turn is a turn towards programming: opening up space in the process of presenting performance for the visualization of and reflection on certain presentational strategies. This seems to me to be the one and only starting point for the creation of a productive discourse on programming. Much like Harald Szeemann's

groundbreaking exposition *When Attitudes become Form* (Bern 1969) contained many destructive, literally *ground-breaking*²³ artworks that symbolized the definite destruction of a traditional method of presenting art, programming practice too must undergo a radical transformation of at least one of its components: presenting a program can no longer consist of just the final selection, but must incorporate some insight into its selection process as well. A turn towards programming is the only truly specific conclusion for programming from the theoretical discussion here before, pointing towards a truly new future, alternative approach to 'traditional' programming. Paradoxically, this specific demand is in itself not specific: there is no one way of opening up programming – there are no predefined steps an individual programmer can take that I can describe; I will merely point to possible openings here. I argue in fact against any predefinitions in the practice of programming, responsible for some of the fixities I'll go into below: a practice concerned with art, like programming, should always be seeking to correspond to the creativity that is at the basis of that art. Of course, its material is different – programming juggles with audience numbers and budgets, rather than actors and lighting – but programming should approach its activity with the same scope of novelty as art. In order for a programmer to be able and willing to take responsibility for a program, programming must become more of an individualized practice, reflecting the profile of the single programmer and the specificity of his or her selection (process). The programmer must feel much less pressured by any predefinitions of the programming practice, as is the case now; my interviews demonstrate this. So my plead for an emancipation of the programming practice is directed at a specific programmatic turn on the one hand and on the other hand at a deconstruction of the specifics 'defining' the current programming practice.

This plead comes at a time when I see other forces in theatre stir as well. In 2004 Jacques Rancière published a book called *The Emancipated Spectator*, in which a selection of articles direct attention to the investment of the spectator in the process of reception. At the same time, *cultural entrepreneurship* is a term often heard now in relation to the subsidiary system in the Netherlands. In times of economic hardship, artists are stimulated to soften the blows of budget cuts by looking for endorsement in other places than state funding. The responsibility of sustaining art is thus relocated from the state as a patron to the artists themselves who in turn must incorporate a form of entrepreneurship into their practice: they must actively 'sell' their work and push it into focus of presenters of art (theatres, galleries, etc) instead of being 'discovered' by

them. This procedure is of course only relatively new to countries that have a history of state subsidies: the United States for instance already has a long tradition of self-sustaining arts. These developments cannot come into being without consequences for the position of the programmer: on the hand s/he is potentially facing an audience that is much more critical and self-aware than before and on the other hand the self-regulating system in the supply of art is no longer active, since every artist now has more or less equal opportunities and actively approaches the programmer.

Consequently, the demand for the programmer to speak out increases: since s/he must better outline the selection he or she has made from a lesser outlined field of artists, to a better informed audience. Or to turn this argument around: if the programmatic turn were to arrive, increased attention to the process of programming would level opportunities for artists since the programmer invests more attention to a specific profile and would thus widen the scope of his or her selection and at the same time better informs an audience through offering more insight into the specifics of this selection. Either way, a programmatic turn would respond to the demands of the time and will support the development of the Dutch performing arts fields.

Another thing hinted at the desire for a change: many programmers I interviewed shared some disquiet with their current practice, either in the form of complaining about the restraints inherent in their job or through displaying a hardened indifference towards the possibility of change. To move now to the interviews: the incentive to organize them was of course to create some of my own discourse to which I could relate in my research and also to get some insight into the thoughts of practitioners. When devising my questions for the interviews, I kept in mind my interest for curating and dramaturgy: this meant that the questions aimed to produce answers on how the programmers reflected on their own practice, the meaning added by their intervention in the process of presenting theatre, the distinction of their position, and their thoughts on the visibility of this position. I spoke with 9 programmers, 1 curator of dance and performance and 1 duo of artists/curators – the last two interviews were of course somewhat different conversations that functioned more as dialogues to inform me and my ideas and to inventory what this practice could mean already in theatre.

The 9 programmers hold positions at different kinds of theatres: small and big venues, specified in some niche or offering a broad spectrum of performances, at cultural hotspots or serving a periphery. Although my questions were more or less the same, I received very different answers with each interview – which is striking when considered

that the actual programs of the 9 theatres differ much less. Before I'll go into possible explanations for this, and the difference in views of the programmers, I'd like to pay some attention to the correspondences in the reactions that I got.

In general, there seems to be little doubt about what it 'means' to be a programmer: the people I met sat and talked with confidence about the demands of the job. There appears to be little room for divergence from a trajectory that has been fixed some time ago: the largest theatres devise their program at least a year in advance to secure their audience which in turn has become accustomed to making their selections well ahead. In a way this disables programmers from interfering with the selection, as it appears to have been made either before their starting at the job or by 'common consent': one programmer said to me that not he didn't consider himself, but the subsidizer to be responsible for the selection of the artist. I protest to this shifting of the responsibility but it reflects the frustration with many of the programmers I spoke with, and all of them, in some way, seek for ways to get around the fixities of their profession: the most popular solution is a festival which liberates programmers and audiences temporarily from the dictates of touring and programming schedules and offers a brief moment of heightened attention for often newly developed and yet unknown performances. Yet the vast majority of the work, the programmers all concluded, is in some way predetermined by a sort of market regulation of supply and demand – although only a few actually used these terms. Strong rationalism met my ideas about curating in the theatre and the possible involvement of dramaturgy in the practice of programming. The programmers were well aware of the fragile balance between audience demand and the supply of their theatre and the dangers of 'disturbing' this balance.

The programmers, without exception, referred to their dependence on what artists decided to make. I was presented with an image of a serving function, on the one hand facilitating the decisions of the artists and on the other hand offering a sensible selection to an audience. The third variable the programmers had to take into account is of course budget. In short, this describes the concrete practice of programming as I found it. It ties the programmer to the theatre, by dependence to the local audience and at the same time by a financial dependence to the theatre. Also, a certain dependence is felt (in part due to the subsidiary system) to a group of artists who are considered to be the prime of the field. A quick look at the program of the theatres I visited reveals that a small group of performances return in each theatre, apparently

fitting into each theatre's 'dramaturgy' – although these were exactly the performances that most programmers couldn't endorse on the grounds of a personal, artistic conviction. A result of recent budget cuts and the promise of more in the near future further pressures the practice of the programmers: since some venues will vanish, the supply will increase at still existing theatres who in turn have less to spend, and at the same time the incentive for audience to come see a show is diminished by the higher ticket price. These considerations further expose the market model at work in programming practice and the dependence of the programmer on these conditions. Again, the rationale here is that there is little space for the self-reflexivity or fluent constructions of curating and dramaturgy.

As a response to the question about their views on the visibility of their function, I generally got the response that it's not part of the job of programmer to construct an image of oneself. All programmers were comfortable with being represented by the institution where they work, or possibly as a figure next to the visible director of the institution. To occupy a prominent position oneself was usually criticized for taking away attention from the performances or leading to the assumption that the programmer should be considered a thematic thread throughout the program. Also, the above described pressures of the profession simply don't allow time to work on a public image or don't invite programmers to do so – since the practicalities of the job are hardly worth communicating to an audience, some programmers told me. A programmer as a public figure was generally considered to be a marketing tool and subsequently discarded as such.

Of course there were also some remarkably distinctive views that don't correspond with what's been said here. For instance Bregje Maatman, programmer at Breda's *Chassé* theatre shared a much more radical take on programming than most other programmers I've interviewed: the specific exception for this theatre is that there is capacity to show large scale entertainment that in turn can finance a highly specific avant-garde programming. Tom Rummens, at the *Brakke Grond*, has decided to undo regular programming altogether and present only festivals: these then become slightly longer than a usual festival and one must take in account the specific niche the *Brakke Grond* serves of Flemish art. Further complicating the comparison between literature on curating or dramaturgy and interviews on programming is that a written text is so much more different from a conversation, more 'distant' perhaps from an actual

practice – disabling the comparison like many of the programmers did. The daily reality of a profession cannot be compared to an ‘abstract’ in a text, it was claimed.

Next to that, there are some fundamental differences in both disciplines of the visual and the performing arts that inhibit comparison: the obvious temporality of performance in contrast to the simultaneity of an exhibition, the usually live and direct character of performance in contrast to the materiality mediating in the visual arts and the very different sphere of presentation of both arts; darkened and seated with performance or brightly lit and without a specified point of view in visual arts. These differences in the character of both art disciplines have of course led to different understandings of both programmer and curator.

Yet, as I’ve mentioned before, my aim is not to forcefully introduce *curating* in theatre and assume its workings are the same in both disciplines. Some of the responsibilities of curator and programmer are similar though, and can be analysed regardless of the discipline they’re active in. I’ve discussed the practice of the curator in the second chapter of part 1 and the practice of programmer may be considered with some of the same requirements. A programmer is someone who selects artworks to be in a temporary constellation – a program. He or she is someone awarded with the power to include or exclude and accredited with an expertise to decide on what grounds. One cannot go outside the position of the programmer – the performance cannot ‘present itself’ – and thus this position adds to the cultural meaning of an artwork in social reality. This in turn means that programmers are active in a system that doesn’t exist solely *outside* them: they are equally present and responsible as the artists and the audience and should, in my opinion, reflect on their position like curators have begun to do. So the remark that there is a system active that disables programmers to choose freely and to which an audience has grown accustomed, doesn’t dismiss programmers of their responsibility to react to the fixities it entails: they still share in this responsibility and since they occupy a key position in the visibility of art, it should be a position of discussion and reflection that does justice to a vibrant art scene. Programmers, in my opinion, should be made much more explicitly responsible for co-creating the image of the performing arts field: verbalizing trends and movements and pointing towards future and past. I’m convinced that much of the frustration of the programmers I’ve spoke with would dissolve as a result of this and that they’re in fact capable of immediately taking up that responsibility.

My main argument here is for transparency; a 'demystification' in the words of Seth Siegelaub. As I've tried to describe the position of programmer faces some of the same responsibilities as the curator and these determine in a way the image of an arts scene. Part of this responsibility should be to openly reflect on the decisions taken, as with curators. It doesn't even further strain the budget! But since information means power, there is something to be lost with transparency: an audience can discover that the programmer or the theatre hasn't really got clear ideas as to why a performance is shown and an audience should come and see it, or that a personal relationship is the reason for the presentation of an artist. These considerations shouldn't result in the continuation of obscuring the selection process and presenting only the finished program but should be faced head on and dealt with in a creative way: programmers should strive to have a personal investment in each performance they show – as artist/curator Michael Portnoy stated in my interview – and to have no clear conviction about the reason for presenting a performance can no longer suffice, and lead to 'just' presenting it; as *it is*. I believe that the risk of this loss is the reason why some programmers prefer to be represented by the institution for which they're active. I'd like to refer here to the quote of Mieke Bal in the first chapter of part 1; that every exhibition is an argument, objectifying the one exhibiting. Just like the museum's constative gesture of 'this is how it is', a program is always presented by the institution that is the theatre, thus keeping the programmer away from the possible responses for the choices (the 'argument') that s/he alone has made. To conclude with another reference, to Florian Malzacher: just like curating, programming involves a whole lot more excluding than including – a programmer should be obliged, from now on, to verbalize to both audience and artists his or her motivations to decide who is, and who isn't presented.

I've tried to complete the comparison between curating and programming here, based on the information I've gathered in the interviews and juxtaposed by my thoughts on a programmatic turn. In the next chapter I'll present some proposals for a practice of programming informed by dramaturgy.

2-2. programming informed by dramaturgy

In part 1 I've discussed the practices of dramaturge and curator and tried to do so in the light of visual analysis. It is now time to bring the third practice into the constellation; programming. One of the key conclusions from the comparison in part 1 was the crucial function of intermediary both curator and dramaturge can take up which points attention to the impossibility of presenting something 'as it is' while at the same time necessitates some form of visibility of this intermediary. In a way, the programmer occupies a similar position: seeing as there's always a greater number of performances made than there are nights available (and audiences available) in a theatre, the programmer makes a selection and thus functions as an intermediary between the audience and the artists. He or she has specific reasons for comprising the program in a specific manner and this characterizes the intermediary. As I've discussed in the previous chapter, this characterization should be much more explicit.

The first distinction is thus made: a programmer shouldn't have to transform his practice totally to become an intermediary, for s/he already is. The programmer's practice, when informed by dramaturgy, *should* be transformed by the conclusions of dramaturgy and curating that the artworks' absolute autonomy is an illusion and the programmer should take into account his or her visibility as an intermediary. The dramaturge, as described in chapter 1-5, operates at a key position, perhaps somewhat isolated, in-between worlds: theory and practice, art and science, artist and audience. Here, out in the open middle, is where I position the programmer as well. It's only a slight move from the current position; tucked in into the institution.

As I have demonstrated in the first two chapters of part 1, an artwork's autonomy is only relative. Programmers must begin to let go of the assumption that a performance is untouchable; that they can pass it on to the audience without any interference and that they are entirely forced to deal with what's decided to be made. A programmer's influence must surely not be overrated to the point that s/he's considered an 'artist' him or herself, but I feel this influence is underrated at the moment. Much like Florian Malzacher criticizes some performance artists for their adherence to the model of the singular work of art, programmers may be criticized for doing the same: the humbleness with which they act as the 'receiver' and passer-on of the singular performance (artist) does not correspond with the power of their position. The focus here is not on this power, or powerfulness, but on correcting the balance between the worlds that run on each side of the programmer's practice – that in the end, the

authority granted to the programmer is equally distributed and articulated to both audience and artist. An outcome of this is not merely a marketing tool, for the equal distribution of power results ideally in a form of transparency, that doesn't cloak or rephrase certain motivations for prophet ends. As I've learned from the interviews, prophet is hardly ever attained in theatre anyway.

Much like Marianne van Kerkhoven described the dramaturgical effort of embedding an artwork in a social reality, the programmer should be made responsible for 'guiding' the performance in the crossing from the arts sphere to the audience. Again, one should not overrate this, and think of the performance as alien and incapable of relating to an audience itself, but the programmer should take into account the influence of presenting the performance at a specific place and time. Each different presentation of the same artwork yields different reactions – one cannot deny. A factor of influence is the specific context of presentation. Each theatre, each night, is such a context, and each theatre each night thus influences reception of the same performances. This is a second important distinction: an intermediary – be it a curator, dramaturge or programmer – doesn't exude influence on the artwork, but on *reception* of the artwork. I'd like to bring into memory here the three subject positions described by Bleeker: a subject position mediates between seer and seen, but doesn't *belong* purely to one or the other. Like this, the programmer should be conscious of his or her influence on the reception of a specific performance and maybe devise a strategy aiming at a certain reception. By consciously constructing a 'big' dramaturgy, the programmer not only accepts the responsibility that comes with the authority of his or her function, but also gets a chance to broaden reception – actively adding to producing meaning in the cultural sphere.

The dramaturgy of programming lies for a great part in this consciousness of matching a view on reality to a state of affairs in the arts. The programmer must be aware not to abstract from him or herself and look for *the* view on reality and *the* state of affairs in art. Much like the current situation, the programmer in person is awarded with the authority and expertise to decide, for the specific venue and its audience, what gets shown. Yet the demand of dramaturgy is a demand for self-reflexivity: a view on an arts discipline and deciding on a selection of what to present to an audience also implies a view on one's own functioning. When a practice of programming is informed by dramaturgy, it comes with an awareness of one's own visibility – the *argument* that is an exhibition Mieke Bal spoke of. When this programming practice is 'dragged out

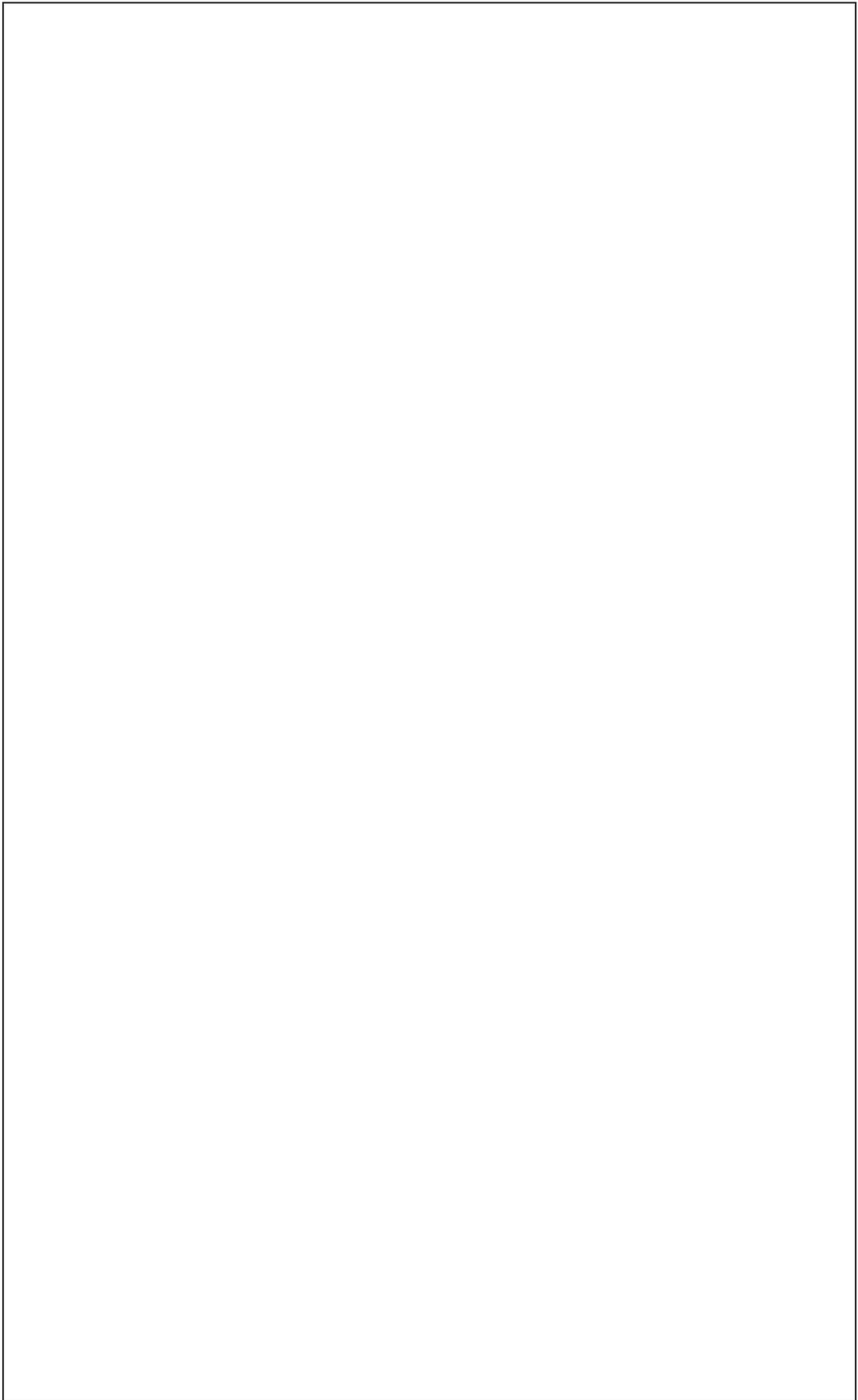
in the open' and the workings and influence of programming are visible, the programmer is obliged to construct an image for him or herself, or the theatre. This is another part of the dramaturgy of programming.

As a result of this, the programmer can start to function as an internal focalizer, introduced by Bleeker: a character inside a theatrical construction that through its presence directs attention towards the construction of vision. Of course, the programmer is not inside a theatrical construction as is implied in Bleeker's text, but as an example of one of the meritive connections a dramaturgy of programming can establish, it's most useful. The programmer does emerge somewhat as a character, from the procedure I've described above. And this character is in fact active in a construction of vision, namely a perspective on the field of performing arts through the program. Since this character now openly reflects on his or her own presence, sharing the '*deepest held views and beliefs*' (Bal) so to say, attention is directed at the very construction of the program, i.e. the dramaturgy of the program. Dramaturgy of programming can thus, in my opinion, lead to a more easy and better established access to the performances in the program. For if the programmer is to emerge as a figure with a 'human size' – in contrast to programs being presented by the vague body of an institution – an audience can much better relate to the program s/he presents. I personally hear a lot of people around me, who are above average interested and active in the arts, say that they don't go to the theatre except for when someone *takes* them there. This someone could be the programmer – again, not merely as a marketer, for as Lieke Jordens at the *Verkadefabriek* rightfully stated: you can't say as a programmer 'something's good and you should come!' with every performance. Also, one shouldn't think of an implementation of a dramaturgy of programming as merely *side-programming*: dramaturgy here functions as a ground on which decisions are made and not as 'decoration' of previous choices. Awarding importance to surrounding contexts shouldn't position dramaturgy again in the periphery of attention; one then ends up in the negative arguments of hindrance and redundancy, as mentioned before.

An audience will react well to transparency and it will recognize an effort to offer insight into why something gets shown – perhaps even an insight into what doesn't get shown. This is my assumption, and I imagine it to be a right time to award to programming its own distinct *parcours*; its own dramaturgy. I want to conclude with a comment on the preoccupation with the market model in traditional programming, from

a writer I greatly admire that has written bitterly hilarious on the subject in *Frakcija* –
Marten Spangberg:

Consider that there are approximately 250 conventional black box theaters spread over Europe. How does it come that they all utilize the same marketing strategy and stick to it year after year when the lack of audience is always a central problem? Is there some central agency that has decided that a black box theatre must have a season program presented in the form of an accordion-like folder? How is it possible that the imagination of programmers, festival and season directors is so limited that the accordion has become mandatory? ²⁴



final thoughts.

Curatorship is a topic that slowly crawls into focus of discourse in the performing arts. Hints at this are the facts that I was able to have two interviews with curators in the Dutch field and found a theatre magazine devoted entirely to the subject, which was in fact officially presented at a whole conference on curating performing arts in Essen, Germany. It appears to be a concept that currently only circulates in international theatre and performance research and hasn't (yet) fully materialized in any Dutch practice. But fragments of thoughts on curatorship did surface in some of the conversations I've had: in the first place in some of the disquiet felt by programmers with the current practice but in the second place curating was also considered as a future alternative to secure an audience in light of further budget cuts. The performing arts field is relatively limited compared to some other arts, in terms of money that circulates, audience numbers and innovations in presentational models – curating may help in sustaining the performing arts and, as I've tried to demonstrate, enrich the field.

Of course I've avoided confronting some practical obstacles here and ignored some concrete demands that programmers face in their daily practice. This is in the first place because, even though I've been an intern at a programming department and have had the interviews, I'm not a programmer: I'm not as well aware of the obstacles and demands as a programmer is. I can imagine that a programmer is limited in his or her time and cannot invest time and energy in each show and thus construct a dramaturgy of programming. Maybe this shouldn't even be a task of the traditional programmer. Also, a programmer is limited to a budget – and simply can't afford to do as s/he chooses. Here I don't pretend to be able to present a clean 'solution' to a problem – there isn't even as much as a 'problem' to find a solution to anyway. But I do hope to have been able to successfully demonstrate an alternative to traditional programming, informed by dramaturgy. I do criticize an attitude of programmers – collectively responsible for creating the image of the programming practice – towards the fixities of their profession as *just there* and I propose a move 'out in the open' to confront these fixities and engage with them in a creative way. Programmers will become more isolated from their institution and each other and more exposed to their audiences, but as I argue it won't change their practice much: all that they have to do is emphasize what is already showing, albeit implicitly. We can see that using the accounts on visual analysis, demonstrating the constructions active in vision. The only big

difference is that this emphasis on the process of showing becomes an element of the presentation.

What is thus added is the demand to create an image of oneself. This doesn't mean that the programmer must create an image of one's own private person and it surely doesn't mean one should aspire a purely marketable image, but by becoming a point of reference a programmer becomes obliged to better distinguish his or her position – a distinction that is now made already, but behind closed doors or in the disembodied form of the institution. Using the experiences in curatorship, we can see how self-reflexivity promises to be a good starting point for creating this distinguished image of the programmer.

Following from reflection on the workings and influence of the programmer's own position, is reflection on the art and social reality that surrounds it. A programmer can communicate to an audience his or her understanding and hopefully an interest in the dynamics of this practice now that s/he has fully acknowledged his or her role in this dynamic. Much like a dramaturge, the programmer is positioned in between the artist and the audience and functions as a bridge that facilitates a specific kind of interaction between artwork and spectator. The programmer must speak out on his or her understanding and vision of the connection between these two worlds, and can do so using dramaturgy. This is the beginning of a programmatic turn. I look forward to its promises.

acknowledgments

The title of this thesis is taken from an article by Hans Ulrich Obrist, who in turn took the line from Deleuze – but I've not been able to find where it was first coined. The three drawings here published are sketches by my father, Ben Hupkens.

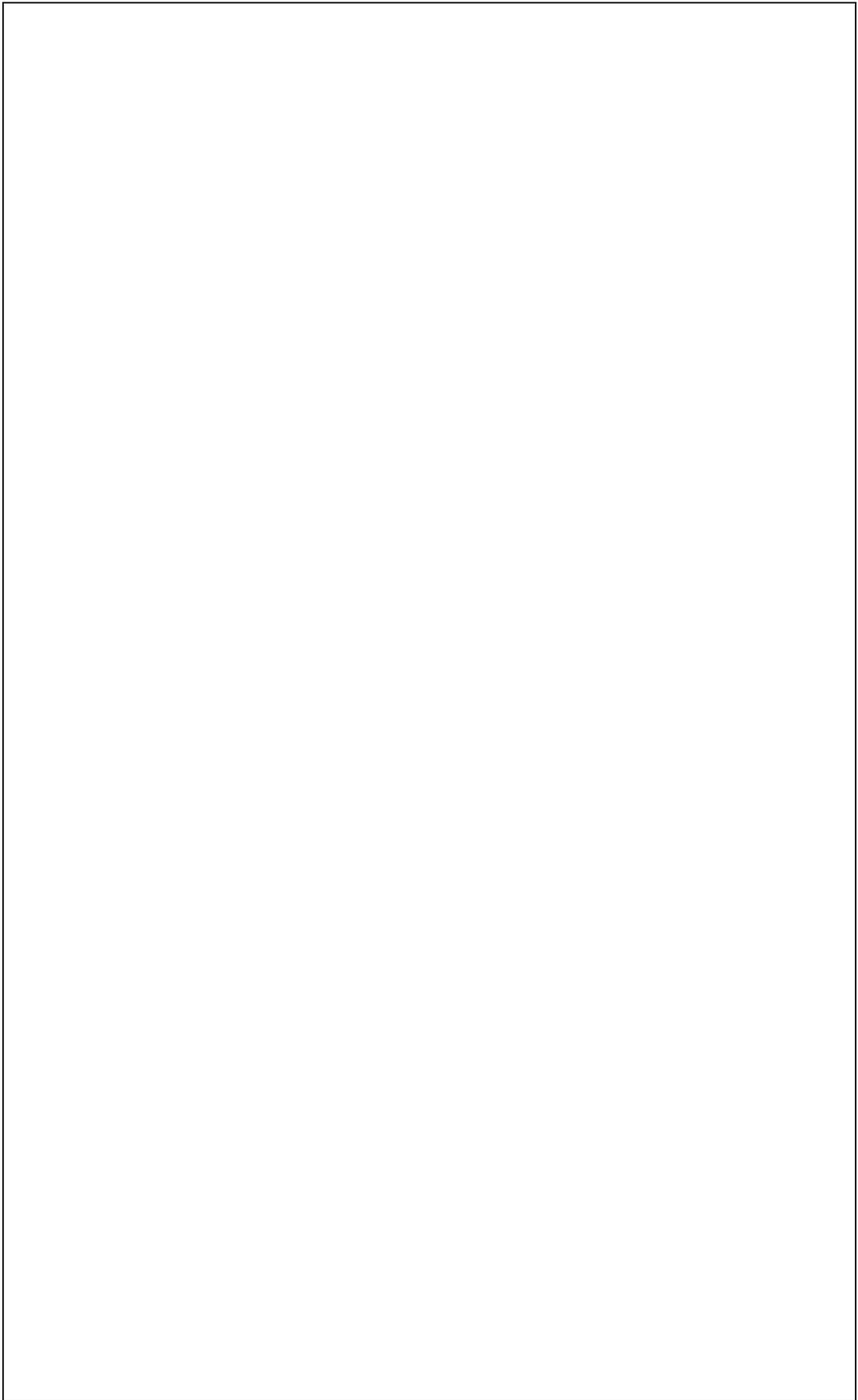
I would like to thank those who inspired me during the year of my Master education. Fellow students Aukje Verhoog, Maartje Keijzer and Anne-Karin ten Bosch for connecting with me and breathing life into the literature we studied. They helped me to form the thoughts in this thesis. I would like to thank Maaike Bleeker, for offering me an inspiring perspective on theatre and a fun way of studying it. Sigrid Merx for being the ideal tutor for me during my writing. Marianne van Kerkhoven for guiding my thoughts.

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Jasper Hupkens, march 2011.



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notes

¹ Bleeker 2008, p.1

² Bleeker 2008, p.7

³ idem.

⁴ Bleeker 2002, p.132

⁵ Bleeker 2002, p.152

⁶ Bleeker 2008, p.13

⁷ Groys, 47

⁸ Groys, 45

⁹ O'Neill 2007, 13

¹⁰ Obrist, 129

¹¹ Obrist, 57

¹² Obrist, 59

¹³ O'Neill 2007, 15

¹⁴ Groys, 44

¹⁵ Groys, 45

¹⁶ Frakcija, 12

¹⁷ Frakcija, 13

¹⁸ Frakcija, 15

¹⁹ Frakcija, 51

²⁰ Frakcija, p.75

²¹ van Kerkhoven, p.203

²² van Kerkhoven, p.201

²³ Artist Michael Heizer demolished the sidewalk in front of the museum with a wrecking ball – a performance that lasted throughout the whole exposition.

²⁴ Frakcija, p.70

