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Performative contexts in contemporary theatre: towards the emancipation of the relational sphere

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Introduction

Since the emergence of the European avant-gardes in the early twentieth century, many have been the attempts that have challenged theatre, the performing arts and the limitations of drama as a genre. For decades, ‘representation’ in theatre has been understood as a unique event originating in the simultaneous presence and mutual perception of a number of actors and the audience attending a play. This belief usually goes hand in hand with seeing a play as an event where something necessarily happens. Likewise, this notion appears to be strongly linked with the assumption that the encounter between living bodies taking place during a play automatically creates a sense of community among those involved (that is, the actors and the audience). This definition, however, does not seem to adequately address the challenges facing contemporary theatre. As Jacques Rancière points out in The Emancipated Spectator: ‘What exactly occurs among theatre spectators that cannot happen elsewhere? What is more interactive, more communitarian about these spectators than a mass of individuals watching the same television show at the same hour?’ (Rancière 2008, 16).

According to Rancière, the mere fact of attending a play does not automatically ‘activate’ a sense of community in the audience nor in the actors. Contemporary stage creators appear to be aware of this as well, as they are increasingly willing to build new spaces for collective
representation that allow them (and the rest of the people participating in the event) to approach and explore human relationships from innovative perspectives. Rancière’s point of view suggests, indeed, a number of questions that continue to challenge the mainstream perception of what theatre is and how it works in the present day. This chapter will be dedicated to examining those that stand out as more relevant to our study:

a) What defines the contemporary plays that in the twenty-first century challenge our perception of the place we occupy in the world (how and why we inhabit a certain space)?
b) What is context from a performative point of view?
c) How can we approach plays that cannot be separated from their context? What are the limitations of current scholarly research on this subject?
d) Why has context become a fundamental actor? Can this be considered as a symptom of the need to rethink the social and community-related aspects of theatre from innovative points of view?

Delving into these questions might not only prove useful in understanding the recent evolution that has led to the present situation of the theatre scene, but it might also contribute to helping us re-evaluate the current theoretical and practical approaches to what can be called ‘dramaturgies of the context’, as well as their consequences for both the contemporary theatre scene and future scholarly research into issues related to it.

In order to approach these issues, two contemporary plays will be analysed: *El triunfo de la libertad* and *The Quiet Volume*. *El triunfo de la libertad*, a controversial work by La Ribot, Juan Domínguez and Juan Loriente which premiered at La Bâtie Festival in Geneva, Switzerland, has not stopped generating the most varied responses among both the critics and the general public since its official opening in 2014. *The Quiet Volume*, a collaborative work by Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells, has been touring libraries all over the world after its premiere in 2010. Even though the two selected works may seem quite different from each other, both of them stand out for their focus on the spectator and, accordingly, on the context in which the play takes place.

German author Erika Fischer-Lichte’s contributions concerning the aesthetics of the performative provide a possible approach to explaining the actual evolution of the theatre scene from the early twenty-first century to the present day. Over the last decades, several movements and creators have challenged the traditional definition of ‘representation',
resulting in what has been coined as a ‘crisis of participation’ (Fischer-Lichte 2008). For the most part, the main goal of those challenging both representation and participation in theatre has been to de-automatise the spectator’s role. In this light, the most noticeable outcome of the changes brought about by artists throughout the recent history of theatre is probably the increasing importance of context, which has become the most relevant aspect of contemporary plays. As a result, the relationship between the actors and the audience is being redefined. Likewise, shifting the focus to the context in which the play is taking place is now allowing emergent artists to explore the possibilities of the ‘spectator’s emancipation’ (Rancière 2008).

**The performative turn**

In her well-renowned work *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2008), Erika Fischer-Lichte lays out the characteristics and implications of what she coined as the ‘performative turn’ in contemporary theatre. With this concept, Fischer-Lichte isolates and describes what, in her eyes, are the main features that distinguish contemporary theatre. The most relevant is that, while being performed, the play becomes an event that inspires the audience to increase their awareness of what they are experiencing and not just seeing, bringing forward the relationship between the ‘material status’ and the ‘sign status’ (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 54). In the same way, seeing the play as an event instead of as an unchangeable work of art redefines the relationship between subject/object, material status/sign status.

As Fischer-Lichte points out, from a traditional hermeneutic and semiotic perspective, it is essential to establish a clear separation between subject/object, observer/observed, spectator/actor, materiality/signicity (signifier/signified). The aesthetics of the performative instead propose a redefinition of these dichotomies: the play is no longer seen as a mere sign, but as an experience – a living event that takes shape as the individuals involved share the same space and time, becoming co-subjects in the development of a collective experience. From this point of view, the material elements of the play are not simply signifiers that spectators can fill with a certain meaning. As Fischer-Lichte sees it, the material aspects act as a powerful trigger for physiological, affective, volitional, energetic, and motor reactions that motivate further actions (34–5). These reactions are, for their part, conditioned by the cultural, political, economic, and social context.
The concept of performativity was coined in the second half of the twentieth century. It originated in the field of language philosophy as a notion related with Austin’s well-renowned speech acts theory. However, the conditions required for an utterance to be performative are not only linguistic. They depend, above all, on institutional and social matters. Cultural studies scholars realised this in the 1990s and decided to approach the concept from new perspectives, using it as a tool for research in gender and identity studies. Judith Butler’s work is one the best examples (Butler 1993). According to her, gender is and must be read as socially and culturally constructed. In this light, ‘the here so-called performative body acts do not convey a preconceived identity, but they create identity’ (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 54). Identity is thus seen as the result of a process of embodiment, given that ‘the stylized repetition of performative acts embodies certain historical and cultural possibilities […] and only this way [performative acts] generate the culturally and historically marked body as well as its identity’ (56).

Notwithstanding this, Fischer-Lichte has suggested that the aesthetics of the performative need to complete the existing theories by developing a more accurate definition of performativity that matches the reality of its current situation. In the author’s words, ‘the first performative turn in the twentieth century European culture did not have its place in the performance culture of the 1960’s and 1970’s but occurred much earlier with the establishment of ritual and theatre studies at the turn of the last century’ (63).

Cultural anthropology studies might prove useful in this context. The works by Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep are particularly helpful to understand the strong connection between ritual and theatre.¹ The first research studies on theatre, published in the early twentieth century, strongly relied on the idea that Greek theatre (and consequently, Western theatre) had its origins in ritual, not in literary texts. This notion, which would be reappropriated by theatre scholars in subsequent years, is the backbone of the performative turn theory and its redefinition of the relationship between actors and spectators.

During the 1960s, visual artists like Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell, the Viennese actionists, and the members of the Fluxus group created a new genre in the field of performing and action arts. Their actions had great influence in the art scene, and performance started to be seen as way of bringing to life the formal and conceptual ideas behind art creation (Goldberg 1998, 24) – the performative turn was taking place and its effects were noticeable in every art form: music, literature, theatre …
In the field of theatre, the performative turn redefined above all the relationship between actors and spectators (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 42), which at the same time led to the questioning of a key concept: representation. This was, indeed, the origin of what is known as the ‘crisis of representation’, that is, theatre stopped being understood as a mere tool for representing a fictional world. This conception of theatre had created a framework where all actions executed by actors and spectators during a play were self-referential (that is, they were not intended to mean anything beyond their own execution) and, as such, they were constitutive of reality. It is important to highlight that, in that context, actions needed to be self-referential in order to actually be performative. However, as the influence of the crisis of representation spread through the arts scene, theatre started to be seen as a possibility for creating a collective experience – an encounter with the potential to make something happen among the actors and spectators involved in a play.

Establishing a clear separation between theatre and performance is not an easy task, mainly due to the fact that new uses of theatrical signs brought about by the crisis of representation are blurring the borders that used to delimit them as independent domains. The increasingly common aspiration to use plays as a means to experience the real (a feature traditionally associated with performance art) is distancing contemporary theatre from traditional drama. With the aim of describing this new status quo in a more accurate way, Fischer-Lichte has revisited Marx Hermann’s works and proposed a redefinition of the concept of performance: an action or group of actions with the power to produce ‘a unique, unrepeatable constellation between the actors and spectators co-presence’ (72). According to the German author, the main interest of the performed actions now lies in the dynamic processes happening among all the people involved in the play. Accordingly, both actors and spectators have a role in what in this light is seen as a unique shared experience.

Certainly, the physical co-presence of the participants involved in this kind of theatrical event is at the core of what has been referred to as a ‘happening’. This is not, however, the only condition determining it: context, too, is crucial, as it became more and more explicit in performances put on show during the 1960s and up to the 1990s. Since the 1990s, theatre/performance art seems to have taken a turn towards a deeper exploration of the performativity of the play/event. This has resulted in a redefinition of the spectator’s paradigm, which now focuses on the social aspects related with theatrical events and has been broadened to include a wider number of art disciplines and techniques.
The proliferation of art-related educational projects (encouraged by the arts in context movement, born in the 1990s) is a good example of this.

As it has been pointed out by critics and scholars such as Claire Bishop, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Jacques Rancière among others, shifting the focus from the play (in its most traditional definition) to the audience led to a re-evaluation of the social aspects of the (now accordingly renamed as) theatrical event. While relatively recent works like *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Claire Bishop, 2012), *L’Esthétique relationnelle* (Nicolas Bourriaud, 2002) or *The Emancipated Spectator* (Jacques Rancière, 2008) explicitly approach this subject, most of these changes had already been anticipated by Rancière almost two decades before in his work *Le Maître ignorant: Cinq leçons sur l’émancipation intellectuelle* (2004). The most relevant conclusion that can be reached from a close reading of these works is that spectators and context have become the actual dramatic events. In Bourriaud’s words, contemporary theatrical events can be described as ‘a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space’ (Bourriaud 2002, 113).

The performative turn has shifted the interest to where, when, and how a theatrical event takes place among the people involved in it (and actually *making it happen*). In the same way, theatrical strategies have strongly evolved throughout the last decades as a result of the innovations put into place by performance artists and theatre creators, also showing the great impact of the crisis of representation that came upon the Western ‘society of spectacle’ (Guy Debord, 1992). A number of strategies have been developed as reaction to the society of spectacle, the most relevant being immediacy, presence, and the interaction between actors and spectators. Furthermore, actually putting these strategies into practice instigates the participants to question them and their implications (in line with the previously mentioned crisis of participation).

**From a spectacular context to a post-spectacular context**

In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Jean Baudrillard describes contemporary culture as a ‘factory of images’ that are no longer intended to represent reality. According to the French philosopher, contemporary culture reacts to the ‘fading of the real’ by becoming a simulation of immediacy, of actual experience and ‘raw’ reality. Baudrillard refers to a
‘transparent’, a concept that would later be developed by Gianni Vattimo, one of the most influential postmodern critics. In his works, Vattimo analyses the social impact of the media, and defines reality as the result of an intersection of multiple images, interpretations and reconstructions that compete with each other. These conflicting images, he states, are disseminated by the media without any central coordination (Vattimo 1989, 81).

This can be seen as the triumph of what Guy Debord had called (already in 1967) the ‘society of spectacle’: a society where human relationships are not directly experienced and where social life is but an accumulation of spectacles – actual experiences are replaced by or turn into representations of themselves. Debord’s notion of society of spectacle had great influence on subsequent scholars and was essential in the consolidation of Situationism (1957–72), a movement set up by a group of artists, writers, and social critics (among which Guy Debord) that aimed to fight capitalism through the revolutionisation of daily life.

According to the Situationists, the spectacularisation of culture and society should be fought through the actual experience of situations (events). The aim of ‘situations’ as they were understood by the Situationists was to incite in the participants a sensation of liberation from their everyday life. They wanted to promote the experience of moments that were not intended for the production of something, be it objects, images, or services. Nicolas Bourriaud has proposed a further development of this notion. He has pointed out that the society of spectacle has evolved into a new phase, becoming what he has coined as a ‘society of extras’:

The individual has shifted from a passive and purely receptive status to activities dictated by market forces. So television consumption is shrinking in favour of video games; thus the spectacular hierarchy encourages “empty monads,” i.e. programless models and politicians; thus everyone sees themselves summoned to be famous for fifteen minutes, using a TV game, street poll, or news item[…]. Here we are summoned to turn into extras of the spectacle, having been regarded as its consumers (Bourriaud 2002, 113).

Bourriaud’s society of extras theory encourages us to question the actual efficiency of the alternative tools or strategies (immediacy, presence, and interaction) proposed by the Situationists and most performing
artists during the 1960s and 1970s. In Bourriaud’s eyes, contemporary citizens cannot continue to be considered as mere ‘spectators’ (in the most traditional sense of the word, that is, as passive receptors of the spectacle), as they have become active participants in every other domain. In this light, Situationism-related strategies are not valid anymore. They are outdated and ineffective: they lack the potential to allow the emancipation of individuals because they have been absorbed by neoliberal capitalism, a system in which ENJOY is an omnipresent imperative (Zizek 1994, 13) and experience is but another product subject to the dynamics of transaction and consumption.

Authors like André Eiermann have approached the concepts of participation and criticality, two delicate aspects that play an important role in scholarly research on contemporary theatre. The effects of the previously mentioned crisis of participation become apparent in a series of works that Eiermann has labelled as ‘post-spectacular theatre’, a kind of theatre based on criticising criticality:

The crisis of participation has exposed the need for creating new spaces in contemporary theatre that allow us to rethink human relationships from innovative perspectives more in tune with the current times. This is probably the main reason why context (and its impact on the interactions among the participants of a theatre-related event) has become the most important dimension. Contemporary theatrical creations encourage attendees to reinvent their selves through the experience of different ‘ways of being’ (of existing as a living body, and of being present in a certain time in a certain place). These ways of being, as defined by Spanish scholar Óscar Cornago, rely on what he has called ‘minimal actions’ (Cornago 2015, 41). Cornago describes these actions (reading, listening, thinking, talking, or simply being present) as something that could go unnoticed or be considered banal, natural; just trivial everyday life events. However, contemporary creators shifting the focus to such actions encourage us to de-automatise them, raising our awareness of how they are (like all events) culturally and socially determined: why do we applaud at the end of the show? Why do we remain silent when the room’s lights are switched off? Why are the lights switched off at all?
According to Eiermann, the purpose of post-spectacular criticism is to reflect upon the role of human relationships within the context of a spectacle. From this perspective, post-spectacular theatre can be a powerful tool for exploring the social role of contemporary theatre at large. It urges us to rethink the social fabric, its framework and dynamics, proposing the development of ‘rejection strategies’ designed with the aim to allow us to take distance from the society of spectacle. Stoppage, slowness and the stating of absence (Eiermann 2012, 9) are some examples of these techniques.

Esta marcha hacia el vacío, hacia el fin de la función referencial de la escena provoca también la posibilidad de una no estructuración o des-estructuración del mundo. Así como plantearía una desubicación del hombre. […] Es posible que ese vaciamiento sea correlato del desnudo frente al cual el derrumbe de los grandes relatos nos ha expuesto. Nos descubrimos vacíos de aquellos ropajes que nos cubrían y nos daban la seguridad del sentido de nuestras acciones⁴ (Jaureguiberry and Etchecoin 2011, 3).

This emptiness, as it is described by Jaureguiberry and Etchecoin, acts as a mirror for an audience to be (the attendees to the event might eventually become an actual active audience as they contribute to the very process of its happening). In this way, the empty scene works as an open question upon which the attendees are invited to reflect – such is the purpose of the works that this article intends to analyse: El triunfo de la libertad, by La Ribot, Juan Domínguez, and Juan Loriente, and The Quiet Volume (Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells).

Reading and being: El triunfo de la libertad (La Ribot, Juan Domínguez and Juan Loriente)

‘Why did you come to the theatre tonight?’ is the most repeated of the sentences displayed by the LED panels put on show for the attendees (and which are the only onstage installation) for the whole duration of El triunfo de la libertad (60 minutes). The play, officially premiered in 2014, is a collaborative work of three Spanish artists (La Ribot, Juan Domínguez, and Juan Loriente) whose creative relationship dates back to the 1980s, when they started working together in Madrid.

The most remarkable feature of El triunfo de la libertad is that the human presence of performers has been replaced by physical linguistic
symbols (written words) and the (also physical) potential of an empty space (that of the stage) where not a single element is in ‘non-motion’, as the lights, the music, and the LED displays do not remain static. Spectators are urged to become active readers in (and of) a show in which they are given the possibility of playing their very own role. In effect, via their involvement in the apparently banal activity of reading, they become active participants in the process of creating the event, of making it happen. The ostensible emptiness of the stage reinforces not only the absence of actors, but also the now unavoidable presence of the audience. Thanks to their stage design choice, the three creators behind *El triunfo de la libertad* manage to be absent and present at the same time: from the perspective of traditional representation they are, indeed, absent, but they are still present in the room, sharing time and space with the attendees. This simultaneity of absence and presence, along with the fact that nothing appears to be happening onstage, can be seen as another way to ask the main question that needs to be approached by contemporary theatre studies: *what is representation?*

The three artists behind *El triunfo de la libertad* have described their work as an invitation for the audience to reformulate their aspirations and preconceptions regarding theatre and, in so doing, explore and put to test the freedom of their imagination (*La Ribot, Domínguez, and Loriente 2016, 23*). The removal of actors shifts the emphasis of the dramatic weight to the audience. The emptiness of the stage activates what Eiermann calls a ‘third term’, something acting as a kind of ‘mediator’. According to the German author, this third term is what has the power to promote a critical reflection upon our self-image and the automatic patterns we tend to use when interacting with others and the world:

[... ] se hace evidente la participación permanente del tercero [el apuntador secreto], que casi se funde con el actor, pero nunca de manera completa. Sus apuntes se hacen audibles en la escena vacía. Se manifiestan en forma de las expectativas que los espectadores depositan en la representación, motivados por las convenciones a las que están habituados, así como en forma de concepciones proyectadas al vacío de la escena a partir de dichas expectativas⁵ (*Eiermann 2012, 20*).

Given its unusual stage design and purpose, it is not a surprise that many spectators jeered at the play’s premiere, complained out loud and even
left the room before the end of the event. *El triunfo de la libertad* generated reactions of irritation, deep confusion, and anxiety – the lack of the usual rules and conventions caused the play to be invalid in the eyes of most members of the audience.

The play not only encourages the audience to take part in an event where nothing happens, but also it does so in a space traditionally used for conventional theatrical representation. However, the very feelings of confusion and rejection that it might inspire are actually what can trigger a critical approach to what we are seeing and experiencing, and to representation itself:

A reflection that probably is addressed less to conferred meanings of each action than to the question of why certain action has triggered a certain reaction. How do effect and meaning relate in this case? *(Fischer-Lichte 2008, 36).*

A possible answer to this issue lies in context: the rules and conventions that condition and give shape to a play or event are not static – they are fluid and subject to changing during the representation or performance. Contemporary theatrical events thus invite us to experience context not as a pre-established, static entity, but as a constantly changing and dynamic process.

Seen in this light, context can be a potent tool with an actual capacity to enable emancipation. In regard with ‘intellectual emancipation’ as Rancière sees it, the spectators’ power is not rooted in community, but in their capacity to translate what they perceive in their very own way and to connect it with the ‘unique intellectual adventure that makes [them] similar to all the rest in as much as this adventure is not like any other’ *(Rancière 2008, 16).* The ultimate goal would then be to create new spaces where individual differences are welcome, brought together, and accepted. This would allow spectators to be themselves in a way that feels ‘true’ and develop their own unique interactions with the objects and the people surrounding them. As Rancière puts it, ‘in all these performances what is involved is linking what one knows with what one does not know; being at once a performer deploying her skills and a spectator observing what these skills might produce in a new context among other spectators’ *(22).*

*El triunfo de la libertad* invites spectators to observe, but also to be observed. It encourages them to redefine their expectations and preconceptions on what theatre actually is. To do so, it urges the audience to test (and put to test) the freedom of their imagination – how free are we really?
Inviting us to reflect on this question is also the goal of Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells’ *The Quiet Volume*.

**Seeing, reading, and listening: The Quiet Volume  
(Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells)**

As is the case with *El triunfo de la libertad*, *The Quiet Volume* is too a collaborative work set up by Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells, two creators with long-standing careers on the theatre scene. *The Quiet Volume*, premiered in 2010, has since been on show at some of the most renowned libraries in the world.

The play focuses on everyday actions (seeing, reading, and listening), inviting us to reflect upon how the proposed activities induce the creation of mental images, thoughts, and associations. *The Quiet Volume* ‘proposes […] to revoke the privilege of vitality and communitarian power accorded the theatrical stage, so as to restore it to an equal footing with the telling of a story, the reading of a book, or the gaze focused on an image’ (Rancière 2008, 22).

At the beginning of the play, every spectator – only two spectators are allowed per show – is provided with a headphone set and an MP3 device. They are then asked to enter a library room and invited to sit at a table on which lie two piles of books. For about 60 minutes, the participants are given instructions in order to perform simple tasks (‘you just have to listen and read the books at your own pace’). A voice whispers into their ears: ‘The first thing you notice is that, for a place dedicated to silence, there’s not really that much silence at all …’. The voice guides the ‘spectators’ through what could be described as the ‘experience of the objects of everyday life’. It draws their attention to the subtle movements of the library users and the sounds and noises caused by their actions: typing on keyboards, turning pages, closing books, holding in sneezes. For the duration of the event, the participants become ‘hidden spectators’ – imposters, fake library users – of other people’s privacy.

*The Quiet Volume* enables ‘spectators’ to set up their own individual staging of the ‘play’. Their ‘personalisation of the stage’ is also encouraged by the imaginary of the specific books they read during the event, as Hampton and Etchells propose different ‘scenes’ based on a careful selection of readings: three novels (Jose Saramago’s *Blindness*, Agota Kristof’s *Klaus and Lucas* and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans*) and a photography book (*Cityscapes* by Gabriele Basilico).
Hampton and his creative partner Silvia Mercuriali created the term autoteatro to refer to this kind of display. In autoteatro events, the spectator’s participation is based on subtlety, rigour, and imagination. Its goal is not to urge participants to be clever or inventive and it does not encourage competitiveness of any kind. Autoteatro is not addressed to an audience in the traditional sense of the term, but to the ‘participants themselves’ (For more, see the website: http://www.anthampton.com/about.html).

Blindness, loss of sight, blank pages, the act of hearing/seeing, snowy landscapes, emptiness/the void, post-war ruins, and lack of light are the words most frequently repeated by the ‘guiding voice’. Invitations to read a book on one’s own are alternated with the instruction to perform a collective reading along with the other participant. This enables different ways of experiencing the images suggested by what is being read and how they are affected by the changing conditions both of the surroundings and the reading approach. According to the authors of the play, this experience can help us build new mental patterns for inhabiting space – a new sense of spatiality that is made possible by the practice of different ways of being present, seeing and listening. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, to be listening is to open up towards an ‘itself’ that enters a new spatiality as long as it opens to that listening: ‘écouter, c’est entrer dans cette spatialité par laquelle, en même temps, je suis pénétré: car elle s’ouvre en moi tout autant qu’autour de moi, et de moi tout autant qu’au dehors, et c’est par une talle double, quadruple ou sextuple ouverture qu’un “soi” peut avoir lieu’ (Nancy 2002, 33). ‘Listening’ originally meant ‘un lieu d’où écouter en secret’ (16), which, again, brings us back to the notion of privacy, of being a ‘hidden spectator’.

Public space (the library) and private space (the new senses of spatiality allowed by the participant’s imagination) are at the core of The Quiet Volume. Explicitly approaching the tension existing between both spaces motivates new ways of seeing, listening, experiencing ourselves in the context of the surrounding space. While The Quiet Volume encourages the desired reactions of the audience by urging them to experience public space from a ‘staged’ privacy, El triunfo de la libertad reaches its goals through deliberately exposing the audience as ‘public’ in a public place. In this regard, it is interesting to point out how the isolation experienced by the spectators taking part in The Quiet Volume contrasts with the community of attendees created by the setup of El triunfo de la libertad. Despite this, both plays share a similar interest in questioning the traditional notion of representation.

Both El triunfo de la libertad and The Quiet Volume challenge representation and its implications in contemporary societies. In Ant
Hampton’s words ‘questioning the means of representation and the processes by which we watch and are aware or not of what’s going on. But it’s constantly playing with representation […] setting it up in order to break it down. Setting it up in order to cut the strings and feel it fall’ (Gansky 2015).

Conclusions. Towards the emancipation of the relational sphere

Contemporary theatrical events as the ones analysed throughout this article are trying to fight the traditional theatre aesthetics linked with the effects of the so-called society of spectacle. To achieve this, creators have opted for new theatrical strategies and stage designs that promote new ways of interacting with each other and the world. As Nicolas Bourriaud has put it, ‘In our post-industrial societies, the most pressing thing is no longer the emancipation of individuals, but the freeing-up of inter-human communications, the dimensional emancipation of existence’ (Bourriaud 2002, 73). For reaching this goal, creators are now proposing works that aim to establish an open, continuous dialogue with society and with the context in which they take place. As a result, plays are no longer locked inside the realm of their own aura, as the focus has been shifted to the role of the audience and the relational context of the event. Theatrical events have stopped being finished, invariable objects – they have become unique entities subject to constant change.

More and more studies conducted in the field of aesthetics of the performative are urging us to re-evaluate the importance of context, its social potential and implications as a powerful tool in contemporary theatre, as it is exposed by works like El triunfo de la libertad and The Quiet Volume. The aesthetics of the performative provide us with research strategies that can prove useful for the development of more accurate analyses of contemporary theatrical events that deal with complex socio-political and cultural issues and encourage us to reflect upon how the tension between public space/private space, actors/spectators expresses itself in the present time.

Discourse and its attributed meaning is not the nucleus of theatre anymore, nor is representation seen as an image of a fictional universe. Plays themselves are becoming a ‘third term’, a potential mediator with the aspiration to allow non-spectacular encounters within the (still subject to capitalistic and spectacular dynamics) contemporary society. In this light, theatrical creations like El triunfo de la libertad and The Quiet
Volume can be seen as an act of resistance that, by making us more aware of the complexity of context and how our mere existence contributes to it (despite being unavoidably affected by it), encourages us to reflect upon the automatic patterns that we put into practice when relating with others and the world.

Context, more than ever, has become a paradigm for approaching and rethinking the relational sphere as a discourse that conveys meaning to the new ways of being in this representation that we call society.

Notes

1 Fischer-Lichte’s comments on the ‘first performative turn’ refer to the first performative turn in the framework of the Western culture, usually dated in the twentieth century.
2 ‘Criticality’ is a term used for referring to criticism to the society of spectacle. According to post-spectacular criticism, the tools that criticality proposed for fighting the society of spectacle (immediacy, presence, and interaction) are currently inadequate and ineffective, since they have been assimilated by the society of spectacle and have, too, become spectacular.
3 [The term ‘post-spectacular’ is used for labelling criticism of pseudo-criticism, that is, criticality. Criticality, indeed, cannot work as real criticism anymore, since the immediacy for which it called has been assimilated by spectacle from a long time now.] All translations by author.
4 [This change of direction towards the void, towards the death of the referential function of theatre allows the possibility for a non-structuration or de-structuration of the world, which would entail a relocation of the traditional position of man. […] This emptying of the scene is maybe linked to the nakedness into which we have been forced as a result of the collapse of the great narratives. We now feel empty, devoid of the garments that gave us cover and filled us with the confidence that our actions had substantial meaning.]
5 […] makes apparent the omnipresent participation of a third party [the hidden prompter] whose role is almost that of an actor, although it never becomes completely so. What he says is now heard in the empty scene – it is expressed through the spectators’ expectations of the play, which, for their part, are motivated by the conventions with which the audience is familiar. Likewise, they can also manifest in the form of conceptions (those generated by the expectations) that the audience projects on the empty scene.
6 With regard to the role of reading in a play, Ant Hampton has stated the following: ‘I was reading Tim’s stuff, talking about text, his thoughts regarding text and writing, particularly what he wrote about how reading can in some ways parallel a sort of dramaturgical process. In that as you turn pages and read, there’s an unfolding event over time, and there’s a conjuring of presence’ (http://www.anthampton.com/about.html).
7 [To listen means to enter a spatiality that, as the very act of my listening takes place, enters me, too: this is so because it unfolds inside me and around me, both from inside and outside of me, and this two, four, or even six-sided unfolding process is precisely what allows the possibility for a ‘self’ to exist.]
8 [A place from which a secret can be heard].
Works cited