

The Philosopher and the Geisha: Alphonso Lingis and the Multi-Mediated Performance of Philosophical Discourse

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There is a need to somehow free philosophy from its sole location in texts that are read, or that are read to you.

— Alphonso Lingis

On January 20, 1997, the philosopher Alphonso Lingis walked onto the darkened, prefabricated stage of an art gallery in downtown Kyoto to perform a reading entitled, "The Religion of Animals." Dressed in full kimono, impeccably presented in the traditional manner of the Japanese Geisha, Lingis stopped and stood before the gathered audience, his face and neck covered in white makeup, his lips carefully and richly outlined in vivid red, and atop his head was a full black wig from which various hair ornaments dangled and glistened. Pausing, the philosopher then proceeded to deliver his prepared text while video images were simultaneously projected onto his costumed body, the shifting patterns of light spilling over and onto a large white screen just behind him: obscure images of moving forms and figures, illuminated trains in the night, people passing, film clips from Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*, parts of bodies—a hand, a breast, a torso—a dense pine forest seen from above, drawers opening and closing, fires burning and smoldering. The small stage on which Lingis stood was lined with large peacock

feathers, and behind the white screen, a previously unseen musician was intermittently cast in silhouette to perform a kind of brief, frantic interlude upon the Japanese string instrument, the samisen, as Lingis, receded into the shadow, remained silent and motionless. Also accompanying Lingis as he read were various prerecorded sounds that often noisily filled the performance space, at times nearly drowning out the precise words being spoken—electric murmurings of machinery merging into the dronings of the didgeridoo, gentle bird song transforming into the screech and caw of the cockatoo.

As these varied sights and sounds filled the performance space, Lingis on the stage, his voice intoning in a direct but undramatic manner, spoke of a symbiosis of sea anemones and algae, of flowers from Brazil nut trees and their required pollinations by a single species of bee, and finally of our own bodies as teeming, symbiotic sites of microorganism colonization, of the "multiplicity within us."

Human animals live in symbiosis with thousands of species of anaerobic bacteria, 600 species in our mouths which neutralize the toxins all plants produce to ward off their enemies, 400 species in our intestines, without which we could not digest and absorb the food we ingest. Some synthesize vitamins, others produce polysaccharides or sugars our bodies need. The number of microbes that colonize our bodies exceeds the number of cells in our bodies by up to a hundredfold. Macrophages in our bloodstream hunt and devour trillions of bacteria and viruses entering our porous bodies continually. They replicate with their own DNA and RNA and not ours. They, and not some Aristotelian form, are true agencies of our individuation as organisms. When did those bacteria take up lodging in our bloodstream? (Lingis 195)¹

In this remarkable Kyoto event, Alphonso Lingis was collaborating with the performance group, *Phylloxera* (a Kyoto-based ensemble that includes Beatrix Fife, Katagiri Mamoru, Michael Lazarin and Hamaya Satoshi) in what would be another of his recent endeavors to explore alternatives to the conventional space and delivery of philosophical discourse. Off of the published page, away from the scholarly conference gathering, Lingis has turned increasingly to variations of performance to articulate and demonstrate a broader philosophical message, enlarging both the conceptual and the physical form to fit his own expanded, multidisciplinary content. And indeed, in a recent interview Lingis went so far as to acknowledge, "... if I had my druthers, all my subsequent talks would be performances."²

Alphonso Lingis is a professor of philosophy at Pennsylvania State University and the prolific author of such books as *Excesses* (1983), *Abuses* (1994), *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing*



in *Common* (1994), *Foreign Bodies* (1994), *The Imperative* (1998), and most recently, *Dangerous Emotions* (2000). Known for many years as an important translator of such prominent figures of continental philosophy as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and later, Emmanuel Levinas, in the 1980's Lingis began publishing works of his own, writings that have gradually and accumulatively attained growing stature and respect within and beyond the strict confines of the academic, philosophical community. Combining a kind of post-phenomenological frame of reference onto a wide range of interests that include anthropology, literature, zoology, music, microbiology, psychoanalysis, photography and, perhaps most importantly, the nomadic observations of the incessant traveler, Lingis is considered by a growing legion of admirers to be one of America's most important, influential, and indeed, audacious and daring philosophers.

Prior to his recent endeavors with performance, Lingis was already a writer whose books had been compellingly linked to image. Nearly all of them, beginning with his early publication *Excesses*, contain multiple examples of his own extraordinary photography, photographs taken during his extended travels in such countries as Bangladesh, Bali, India, Cambodia, South Africa, Guatemala and Indonesia. And, much as the photographs in his books would seem to accompany, infiltrate and enlarge the written text (while not in any particular manner illustrating it), Lingis' performance events present a parallel maneuver of textual expansion and innovation, intermingling within the performance space itself the varied components of language, sound, and image in order to performatively transform himself, his thoughts, and the encompassing stage into a broader, alternative forum for philosophical speculation and enactment. With the Kyoto event as but one example,³ the philosopher's crafted language and thoughts have not been autonomously presented and preserved, left singularly intact and center-staged, but instead, the words and their unfolding implications—echoing spoken themes of symbiotic interpenetration and corporeal dispersions—are mangled and muddled, engaging in a kind of symbiosis and dispersion of their own with the varied environmental stimuli of the evening's event. Upon the stage, the words and ideas that Lingis presents are deliberately, but often indeterminately, joined with the images and sounds of the multi-mediated performance to resonantly accompany the philosopher's powerfully orated statements.

Our sense of ourselves, our self-respect shaped in fulfilling a function in the machinic and social environment, our dignity maintained in multiple confrontations, collaborations, and demands dissolve; the ego loses its

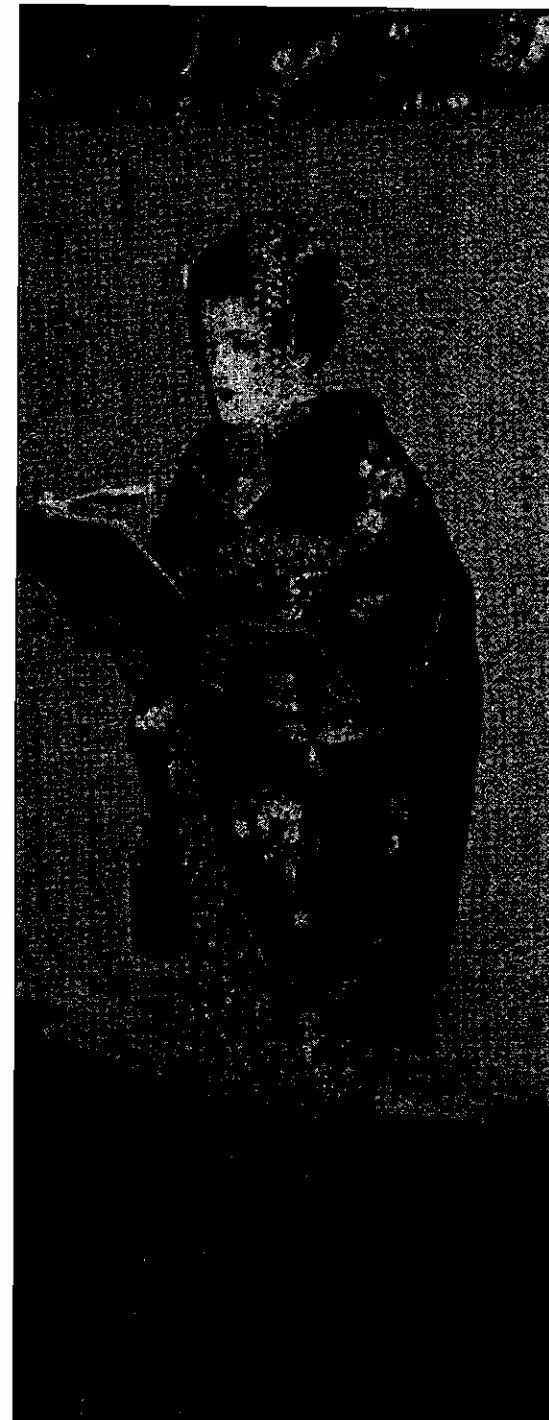


Fig. 1. Alfonso Lingis at the Kyoto Performance. Photo by Karim Benammar.



focus as center of evaluations, decisions, and initiatives. Our impulses, our passion, are returned to animal irresponsibility. The sighs and moans of another that pulse through our nervous excitability, the spasms of pleasure and torment in contact with the non-prehensile surfaces of our bodies, our cheeks, our bellies, our thighs, irradiate across the substance of our sensitivity and vulnerable nakedness. . . . Our muscular and vertebrate bodies transubstantiate into ooze, slime, mammalian sweat, and reptilian secretions, into minute tadpoles and releases of hot moist breath nourishing the floating microorganisms of the night air. (Lingis 201)

And at the moment that these words are spoken in the darkened “night air” of the Kyoto gallery, transposed images of a fondled breast, a patterned fabric, and a murky fluid of light flow onto and over the richly costumed philosopher while the cry of a cockatoo cuts into the ordered oration. The silhouetted musician aggressively strokes his samisen, singing lines from the cave myth of Plato’s *Republic*, “We live in a world of shadows; nothing is certain. What can philosophers say to us? . . . They call to us from the world of light, but can we really know what to think in this world of shadows?”

Microorganism symbiosis, bodily transubstantiations, ego dissolution, bacterial colonization—How is a philosopher to speak of such complex and troubling transformations without falling into a form that arranges (and reduces) them to the tidiness and clarity of mere rhetorical, philosophical formulation, linear linguistic events possessed of a tightly crafted, scholarly cohesion? What indeed, as Plato noted, “can philosophers say to us?” How are they to somehow implicate both their own bodies and those of the spectators into the extended consequences of a difficult and transgressive message of dissolution, decomposition and microbacterial invasion? And how are the erotic dimensions of corporeal mutation and orgasmic dispersion to be rendered visible and tactile through the interpenetrating play of word, sound and image? Aware of maneuvers made in theater and performance art of the twentieth century—from Hugo Ball and Dada, Antonin Artaud’s “theater of cruelty,” Carolee Schneemann’s “interior scroll,” and Joseph Beuys’ “social sculpture” (as well as various shamanistic traditions encountered and explored in his travels), Lingis in his performances presents the occasion for an ambitious, alternative form of philosophical investigation, the staging of a forum to try and challenge the inherited, obstinate dualisms of mind and body, subject and object, male and female, us and animal, us and other. Here, a space is collaboratively created to actively, aggressively interrogate those most tenaciously held philosophical concepts/constructs, a space in which to resist



Fig. 2. Alfonso Lingis at the Kyoto Performance. Photo by Karim Benammar.

and defy the indigenous forms of intellectual, academic presentation that seem inevitably to perpetuate an insidiously recurring content.⁴

And yet Lingis’ performances would appear to be presented not in order to illustrate a set of more accurate ideas or to refine a more rational frame of reference. Rather, an event such as



the one in Kyoto would seem instead a lavish, almost outlandish venture intended to synaesthetically evoke a conceptual, material space of enacted dispersal, a space within which philosophy could be formulated as a kind of staged, alchemical event where, as Lingis at one moment in his performance recites, “the decompositions of the competent body” are visually, sonorously summoned through the performance’s variously imagined projections and interventions—thought made visible and tangible, philosophy thrust into projected dimension.

“What is mesmerized in us,” Lingis at one moment in his Kyoto performance states, “are the inhuman movements and intensities in us, the pulses of solar energy momentarily held and refracted in our crystalline cells, the microorganic movements and intensities in the currents of our inner rivulets and cascades” (191). And in performance, those internal, biological “movements and intensities” that Lingis speaks of are outwardly cast and conjured within the performance space itself, as the philosophical body has been turned inside out, the philosophical discourse turned upside down. Here, the coursing of the invaded blood stream, the electric vitality of the nervous system, the lubricated moistness of coordinated inner organs are exposed to the contaminating, invigorating air of the evening, the *live* performance—all bodies present, all moments converged. By using this enlarged arena for his critical/corporeal investigations, the philosopher and his most pointed and perverse observations are cast into a different, a deviant site (sight) for thought’s unfurling, unraveling—a space for the dispersal of attentions, a dislocation of agendas, the disruption of linear, rational, teleological formulation. Away from the conventional setting of the scholar, the philosopher presents and performs himself as a trans-cultured, trans-gendered shaman in which both he and the spectator are implicated in a viscerally deranged and defiant ritual of hybrid, troubled thought, dangerous emotion.

Lingis, cast as a character within his own philosophical theater, is indeed exploring the corporeal consequences of what he describes as our very non-Aristotelian “individuation as organisms,” testing and teasing academic detachments that tend to sanitize and make conceptually palatable the most disturbing, the most transgressive of thoughts. In addition, by pursuing this altered, expanded form of philosophical discourse, Lingis performatively presents what might be described as a kind of post-colonial colonialism in which the symbiotically inhabited body is depicted as teeming with anaerobic bacteria, parasitically infested with invisibly mutating microbes and macrophages—the body, our *biological* bodies as the last, the next frontier, recalling Walter Benjamin’s prescient observation



Fig. 3. Alfonso Lingis at the Kyoto Performance. Photo by Karim Benamar.

that “The most forgotten alien land is one’s own body.” No longer simply “the other” as other, geographically distant and dispersed, instead our own bodies are now imagined as having been colonized, *become* other, foreign unto themselves, invaded by the microscopic colonizers that simultaneously feast upon and symbiotically sustain our intricate and fragile internal ecosystems. Concepts of autonomy, systems of sovereignty, have now given way to interpenetrating, heterogeneous networks of boundaryless cohabitation. The eye turns inward, like Bataille’s pineal gaze, and sees within its own dispersed stirrings unfathomable, occupied depths confounding systematic comprehension, a deviantly sublime thrust into the vortex of the infinitely small, into the rushing, coagulating fluids of microcosmic surrender.

Covered in costume, flesh made over with make-up, the philosopher’s entire surface is enlisted in the enactment of his own philosophical free-fall, his corporeal form rendered into a receiving screen upon which ideas and images are cast and cobbled like viruses attaching to a host body. An illuminated train passing in the night crosses onto and over Lingis’ tightly bound kimono-clad form; the beautiful, the beastly, a kitchen knife slices across the stomach, birds scream and a loud drone weave into the streaming substance of the echoing words:

Our bodies are coral reefs teeming with polyps, sponges, gorgonians, and free-swimming macrophages continually stirred by monsoon climates



Fig. 4. Alfonso Lingis at the Kyoto Performance. Photo by Karim Benammar.

of moist air, blood, and biles. Movements do not get launched by an agent against masses of inertia; we move in an environment of air currents, rustling trees, and animate bodies. Our movements are stirred by the coursing of blood, the pulse of the wind, the reedy rhythms of the cicadas in the autumn trees, the whirl of passing cars, the bounding of squirrels and the tense, poised pause of deer. (196)

In this richly portrayed erotics of philosophical investigation, Lingis is materially, measurably inching toward the edges of saying something other than what can be printed legibly onto paper, orated coherently in the lecture hall. And yet, this multi-mediated, ritualistic performance of philosophical discourse neither achieves nor presents itself as a triumphant transcendence of the limits

of intellectual representation but rather unfolds as a deliberately fractured, extravagant manifestation of representation's very interrogation—richly entangled thoughts thinking themselves out loud, performing themselves on stage, casting themselves in streaming, sonorous dimension. The ideas and issues are not here rationally resolved or reconciled but visibly, tangibly tossed and turned about, twisted in upon themselves, blending with the projected light, mixing with the enervating flow of sound and image. The philosopher's corporeal substance is bathed in a light of insubstantial, particled motion, his costumed, nearly unmoving body merging with the images projected upon and over it, his singular voice interrupted by a multiplicity of dissonant noises. The seductive Geisha stands before her audience, the philosopher speaks from his shadowy stage,

One does not see the female, one sees the feminine, obeying nothing but aesthetic laws of her own making. An astral woman who appears in the crowd like a mirage, and who drifts effortlessly through doors to wander in rose-gardens and crystal pools the moonbeams create wherever she turns. (202)

And as the performance unfolds, the mask of the performer is not to be removed, the makeup wiped away, the mirage made to vanish (in order to reveal some secret, enduring inner essence—the philosopher's promised stone). Rather, there is in this event a reveling in what Lingis at one moment of his performance calls, "the specific pleasure in appearance, simulacra, and masquerade" (201), a marveling at the grafted allure of adorned beauty, the prosthetic extensions of erotic delight, the ingenuity of containing, however ephemerally, the teeming, invading multiplicity within. The Geisha/philosopher does not disguise or deny this other, more bacterial, less "essential" interior, but instead joyously plays with the varieties of ways in which this biological body can be framed and formulated, stroked and stimulated, celebrated in its very dispersion and decomposition, its parasitical colonization and transformation. On the stage is a three-dimensional, projected palimpsest within which the costumed, camouflaged philosopher presents himself, performs himself, as but one audacious, dazzling component within a larger and more dissonant event, a Deleuzian haecceity, a rhizomatic "spreading of durations"—becoming woman, becoming Geisha, becoming animal, becoming other . . . participating in, integrating into a symbiosis with the shifting setting of the evening's dark and dense air.

Notes

¹ Much of the text from the Kyoto performance was eventually published in *Discourse* 20.3 (Fall 1998).

² These comments were made in an interview with me in October 1998.

³ One of the first instances of Lingis' move into performance came in the late 1970s when he dressed as an executioner to deliver a paper at a Sade conference at SUNY-Stonybrook.

⁴ Indeed, through his work with *Phylloxera* (and other of his collaborative events), Lingis has further dispersed attention away from himself and his own ordered articulations. Such hybrid performances assure a degree of surprise and indeterminacy to each engagement. In Kyoto for instance, the prerecorded sounds were prepared by one person, the video images by another, the stage set up in a certain manner, the samisen interrupted as interlude, and even the kimono was arduously assembled and put on earlier in the day by a trained professional. The culmination of efforts in the actual performance—what images would appear when, what sounds where, etc.—would only be known as the evening's multifaceted event unfolded.

Works Cited

Lingis, Alphonso. "Animal Bodies." *Discourse* 20.3 (Fall 1998): 194–203.

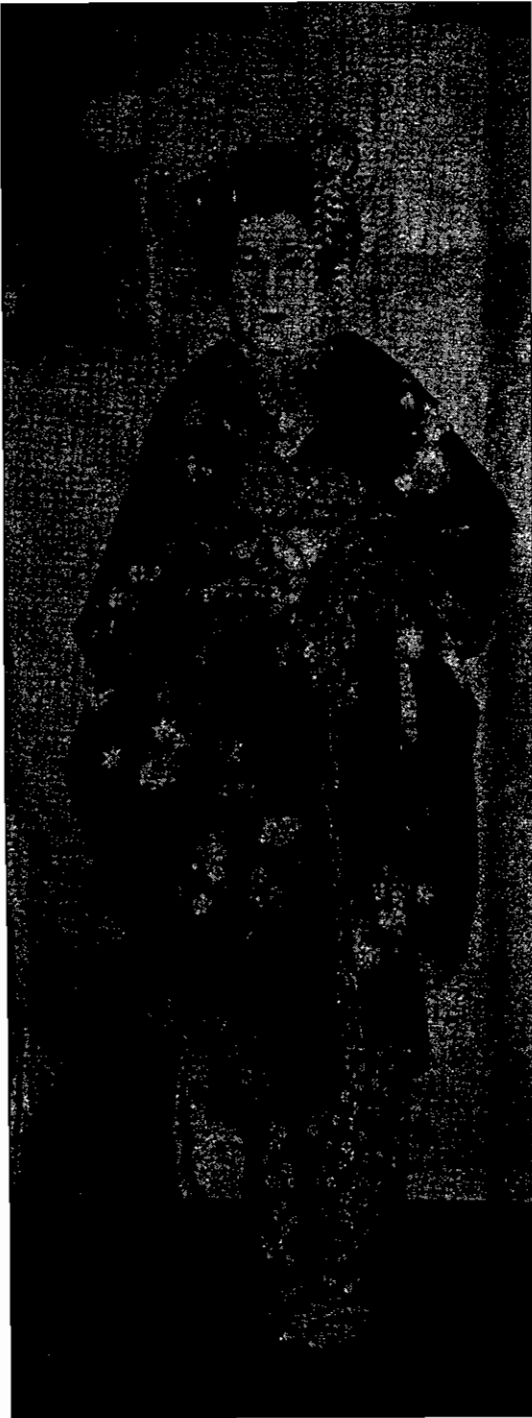


Fig. 5. Alfonso Lingis at the Kyoto Performance.
Photo by Karim Benammar.