

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

(2025)

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

PS

PERFORMANCE & SPACE

PROCEEDINGS OF THE
PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

Edited by

Pablo Berzal Cruz, Athena Stourna, Christina Zoniou, Giorgos Kondis



University of the Peloponnese

Universidad Politécnica de Madrid

2025

Metafeminism and Subjectivisation

Evangelia Danadaki

doi: [10.12681/ps2023.7964](https://doi.org/10.12681/ps2023.7964)

Metafeminism and Subjectivisation Performing the Matrixial

Evangelia Danadaki

Global Centre for Advanced Studies, College Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

In this essay, I propose to consider the connection between performance and a feminine form of subjectivisation by indicating the *borderlinking* between contemporary performance and psychoanalysis. Performance will be approached as an event of co-becoming through the filter of the metafeminist theory of Bracha L. Ettinger. My intention is to contest the hegemonic model of a singular and autonomous subjectivity and undermine the phallogocentric thinking that reproduces the binary logic of self/other to suggest that an alternative model of subjectivisation, rooted in the feminine, can be energised through performance-based practices. To do so, I will argue that performance is an embodied *encounter-event* that suggests a feminine model of *becoming-with* in order to contest the phallic logic of identity and desire that follows the paradigm of castration anxiety. The Ettingerian theory illuminates the constitution of a *being-together* and offers a feminine vision in the field of desire, subjectivity and art by opening the space of visibility with *transconnecting* and *co-affecting* qualities via artworking. Stressing the levels of malleability and jointness of the performing bodies, subjectivity will be approached as a participatory and ongoing process of performing and reforming the self to inform the oedipal model of identification, gendering and sexualisation. The matrixial sphere will be first analyzed and, on a second level, activated in practice by examining Tino Sehgal's performance *Kiss*. Antigone will be revisited as a paradigm of subject-Woman which radically contests the phallic structures to shed light on another complex, a feminine supplementary perspective to Oedipus imbued by the mother-daughter relationship towards the emancipation of desire and the construction of new trans-connected worlds

Keywords: Bracha L. Ettinger, meta-feminist theory, psychoanalysis, performance, Antigone.

Metafeminism and Subjectivisation: Performing the Matrixial

In a world that remains under the phallus' symbolic power the hegemonic model of subjectivity is linked to structures of separation, rejection and domination signified by castration (Pollock, 2006). Raising the question of the feminine in relation to subject formation, I wish to explore the potentiality of performance practices to produce *co-affecting transsubjectivities* contesting the phallic model of subjectivity. My proposition is to approach performance as a *matrixial borderspace* (Ettinger, 2006) which transconnects subjective elements: an *encounter-event of co-poeisis*, where the performing "I" is not fully individuated from the others performers/spectators. The main argument will be grounded on the *matrixial theory* introduced and developed by the artist, theorist and psychoanalyst Bracha L. Ettinger. The matrixial theory transcends the phallic mechanism of identification and castration anxiety (Ettinger, 2003) resisting to reproduce dichotomies such as self/other, male/female embracing a mechanism of a continuous subjectivisation. My intention is to discuss performance in the Ettingerian psychoanalytic context of *subjectivity-as-encounter*: (a). to rethink the subject through the feminine so as to enable a critical cogitation on the relationship(s) between subjects, performance, space and co-becoming and (b). approach performance as an act of *metamorphosis*, which can generate feminine-matrixial kinds of relations, where no *hero(ine)* can claim the possibility of becoming creative alone (Ettinger, 2006).

The conceptualisation of the matrix is not an opposition to the traditional psychoanalytic approaches, but a supplementary theory to the Freudian and the Lacanian symbolic claiming possibilities for subjects to be rebirthed discerned and discerning each other, transcending oedipal sexual difference and gender identification (Ettinger, 1993). The feminine subjectivity (Ettinger, 2006) is not another version of feminine identity. Lyotard commenting on Ettinger's oeuvre will argue that the feminine is a sphere which is not accessible exclusively to women (Lyotard, 2004). According to Judith Butler, Ettinger creates her own vocabulary to "reformulate the very relation between the subject and its other, and to ask what precedes this encounter in which the phallus seeks to confirm its status, where the feminine acts only as a faulty mirror" (Butler, 2006, Foreword). By offering a symbolic relied to the feminine dimension, Ettinger calls us to think of the I as within a contact zone of affected sensibility, a stratum of co-emergence (Ettinger, 2006).

Throughout the matrixial subjectivisation, the "I" (structured subjectivity) is becoming de-centered becoming in joint-ness-with via affectively invested *communicating acts* (Ettinger, 2004). Approaching the human through the matrixial is to forget the dynamics of identity, separations, and cuts imposed by the phallic symbolic promising the entering to a cosmos of fluidity and trans-connectivity that is rooted on the prenatal borderlinking between the *I* and the mother. Becoming matrixially aware is to activate *metamorphic bordelinking* capabilities by

remembering-performing what has been forgotten, what occurred before the subject became a subject—before the “I” became named, recognised, and capable of performing (norms). The matrixial theorisation prioritises the role of *severality* and *encounter* (towards a *becoming-in-severality*) pertaining what happens to subjects before they enter the taken-for-granted reality and the symbolic, introducing the potentiality to re-experience through performing-as-remembering the prebirth encounter of *borderlinking* with the (*m*)*Other* (Ettinger, 2006).

Shifting our thought to pre and subsymbolic levels, Ettinger connects the feminine to the female body in the final stage of pregnancy to propose an enlarged paradigm of subjectivity (Pollock, 2006). She insists on the many-sidedness of the self; subjectivity is something partial and multiple: “we are at the same time both one and several” as the “I” of the mother and the “non-I” of the infant, not fully distinguishable, are being linked on a physical and psychic level, being *co-emerged* and *co-emerging* (Ettinger, 1993, 71). The matrixial refers to the psychic life or “the activity of the erotic antennae of the psyche”, which generates a desire to connect with the other (Ettinger, 2001) recognizing the human capacity to attach. The *matrixial borderspace* is a humanised space of being towards birth and towards birthing (not alone). Its ontological foundation is the *borderlinking* between the “I” and the (*m*)*Other* engaging with the procreation stage of the subject. A stage which Lacan considered “belated, phantasmatic and untrue” since it is positioned before the *Mirror Stage* and the entrance of the child-subject into language and the symbolic order (Ettinger, 2006, 81). For Ettinger, the “I” comes into being before it learns how to speak as the subject-formation begins before the separation of the child from the mother (Ettinger, 2006). Following Ettinger, as we have been through the process of being born, it is impossible that we have lost this capacity of/for connectedness with the other, we just choose to ignore it. It is this un/conscious memory that can cultivate psychic capacities for *shareability* and *transconnectivity* through aesthetic events with others (Ettinger, 2020).

Thusly, subjectivity arises as a plural project of intersubjective transactions enabling a freedom of circulation between partial self-fragilised subjects that participate affectively with/in a shared subjectivity that is “no longer one’s own” questioning the singular perception of the subject. In this line of thought, identification becomes an impossibility: the psychic levels of the (*m*)*Other* affect the “I” in a frame of compassion that has been developed in a pre-birth state and reappears with the function of *anamnesis*. Thusly, transsubjectivity is being engendered through performing the prenatal *borderlinking* within a *borderspace* where the other is acknowledged as an active part of the self through an act of self-fragilisation (Ettinger, 2006).

It is the act of *metramorphosis* that articulates the praxis-as-performance of *borderlinking* between the “I” and the other which implies a mode of openness and connectedness, the weaving of trans-subjective links (Ettinger, 2004). *Metramorphosis* is a notion that has in foundations the Greek word *metra* (μήτρα), which means the womb and is also linked to Greek word *mother* (μητέρα). *Metramorphosis* proposes the emergence of a creative space of unity

that in contrast to metamorphosis that leads to a new fixed form, enables continuous possibilities of engaged and engaging changeability and shareability (Ettinger, 1992). It is a space of constant movements, where everything is in flux; what Deleuze and Guattari would call *a body without organs* or *a figure without centre* designating a *topos* that questions the logic of identity featuring intra-actions not just between, but with/in. In the act of *metramorphosis* nothing is opposed to the other: “sometimes the margins are in the centre, and sometimes the centre is an outer limit.” The matrixial subject seems to be “marginal, and, at the same time, in the centre” (Jabès and Ettinger, 1990, 19), what has been described as the exile of exile, an inside outside, where distinctions are becoming invisible. The matrix proclaims a locus-space of subjectivisation that enables new movements-webs of relations (Ettinger, 1993b, 1993a) that do not allow the erasure of the self, symbolic death or any form of melancholy and victimisation of the woman (Ettinger, 2006), and the self appears as a project to be performed and reformed with others beyond the neoliberal imaginary of autonomous subjectivity.

Performing the Matrixial: No Hero(ine) Can Become Creative Alone

The matrixial sphere is itself a performative encounter-event, so, the question now is: How can artistic performance practices be related to the matrixial stratum of subjectivisation? Or to state it differently: how can the act of *metramorphoses* be experienced and visualised in contemporary art aesthetics? The performing subjects will be discussed as participating subjects in a co-subjectivity via intimate sharing, weaving *subjectivity-as-encounter*. The central assumptions are that performance can animate the matrixial potentiality for *shareability* (Ettinger, 2004) as the borders of the performing subjects blur as they trans-connect (in the case of collective performances) actualizing the *matrixial impossibility of not-sharing*: a *co-eventing* between two bodies that appear together in a “sensationally intense co-emergence” (Pollock, 2006).

Tino Sehgal’s performance *Kiss* (2010) can help us provide a matrixial understanding of performance practice. In this case, there is not a dominant “I” performing a sovereign subject (a protagonist), but there is *an acting-together* which suggests an ethical sphere of co-being. The performers reverberating with one another, are being affected and *borderlinked* within a continuous play of co-affection (Pollock, 2006) making possible an event of co-emergence. It is the imaging of *a moment of jointness*: a performative togetherness that presents the matrixial desire for connection, an image-as-encounter beyond representation, which resists to phantasies of sovereignty, separation and violence. Throughout the performance, the “I” cannot be thinkable without the other and the performing bodies become self-fragilised together, carrying the other.

Figure 1

Tino Sehgal, *Kiss*, 2010.



The performing space in *Kiss* arises as *co-poiesis* between the “I” and the other as the “I” is yearning for the other abandoning their oneness and composing a *partnership-in-difference*. It is an intimate moment that is at the same time public, strangers-spectators can pass by and look at the performers who remain close, touching, kissing, performing in a slow manner that offers the capacity for the development of a matrixial attachment. The separation means the end of the performance and the disconnection from the matrixial conceptualisation. Performance presents itself as an image which does not correspond to the phallic paradigm of identity and thus to that of representation. Sehgal’s *Kiss* is not a pure representation like Gustav Klimt’s famous *The Kiss* or Auguste Rodin’s famous *The Kiss*. Sehgal’s *Kiss* is a collective live action, a co-activity invested with affection and desire for connection suggesting an artistic paradigm of performativity that is not pure representation. Performance appears as an *encounter-eventing* based on inter-relations played on a *borderspace* where the “I” co-exists with the stranger and the subject of action is at the same time the object of desire and spectatorship.

The phallic structures of separation and division are being questioned as the bodies continue moving together producing a system of a co-affective sharing of thinking-feeling-knowing the other. In this way, a shared body-space is being created where the limits of one’s body are no longer ends but links that connect the one with the other engendering a *metamorphic borderlinking*. As a result, within and throughout this process of change and exchange without domination, there is not a dominant “I” but a performing we that

transconnects the psychic with the corporeal, representation with performativity. In this context, performance as a practice (of psychoanalysis) can activate the possibility of beginning and becoming again. In other words, matrixial performing can be understood as what the philosopher Slavoj Žižek calls *authentic act* as that which allows one to question the power of the superego by redefining their own identity enabling a process of birth: “you are born again not in a religious sense but you redefine what you truly are.” (Žižek, 1999, online).

Performing on the floor, kissing in front of strangers, creates a vulnerable condition of resistance to what the phallic logic of hegemony, meaning and reason impose. Another logic is being activated that of a *different difference*, that of art, the feminine and the matrix. Becoming matrixially aware is to perform a desire for connectedness with a world that is unknown (Ettinger, 2006). The Matrix is a compassionate beyond empathy sphere of transference that is linked to an elsewhere which has not yet been felt-thought, as it is to be emerged, it is that which has not yet been born. As a result, performance can enable birthing possibilities that reveal the truthful self of the performing subjects undermining their superego in a framework of inter-connectivity, while embracing difference and the unknown.

The matrixial model of subjectivisation can emerge through aesthetic encounter-events that are not experienced individually. There must be at least two subjective agents: the viewer and the artwork or the viewer and the performer or the performer and the performer. This encounter between the “I” and the other enables a becoming together through the practice of mutual sharing and *communicating*. Performing appears as an open space of changeability and shareability through the continuous movements of reorganisation and transformation between the psychic and *corporeal* dimensions of the performing bodies. Performance appears as a space of birthing within a pregnant space-time of *feel-thinking, see-knowing, feel-knowing* with the other indicating the transition in contemporary aesthetics from phallic structures to the matrixial.

Antigone: A Paradigm of a Matrixial Heroine

In order to strengthen the main argument that relates the matrixial subjectivity to the field of performance we will revisit Antigone from the Sophoclean tragedy as a heroine, which can be a paradigm of matrixial subjectivity that questions family politics and phallic structures by performing *metamorphic borderlinking*. In this case, the assumptions are that (a). the position of the brother is recognised as the *Other* with whom the “I” of Antigone co-emerges and (b). Antigone is acting in a matrixial sphere under the unconscious dynamic of a mother-daughter relationship. Antigone will be discussed as a heroine whose act of resistance is connected to the matrixial questioning the structural logic of desire and visualizing the capability of the subject to enter an inter-subjective zone with no fixed positions.

Levinas and Ettinger agree that in terms of the matrixial, there is a level of debt, a *responseability* for the other. Levinas will emphasise that this thought is at the heart of human ethics. For the matrixial subject the life of another becomes more important than the life of the “I” (Levinas and Ettinger, 1991). The moment of ethics in Ettinger’s theorisation derives from archaic foundations, which unconsciously produce the desire for a shared event (Pollock, 2009). This idea refers to affective-psychic connections that function as resistance towards Oedipus’ theoretical rules (the symbolic). Antigone by defying Creon’s law defied the law of the “Father” condemning herself to death. She knew she would die, but she would have done the ethical deed of burying her brother. Antigone’s criminal act can be read as a feminine act of humanisation: the feminine cannot always be found in every woman, but it should be looked in the human (Levinas and Ettinger, 1991).

Levinas in a conversation with Ettinger (1991), claims that the feminine is understood as a difference with the powerful capability of giving value to the Other and coming after them. The matrixial subject can accept that “the world can have a meaning without me,” because of this ethical relationship (Levinas and Ettinger, 1991, 9). Antigone is dying to *borderlink* with her br/Other. This argument is seen as a symbolic principle of creation giving back to the woman an ethical moment. The disappearing potential of the woman (to a future-death) can be understood as a possibility of expanding the space of being, creating a new space “on the outside like in the inside” (Levinas and Ettinger, 1991, 17).

The concept of the matrix is based on a (platonian) love-eros relationship that is beyond sexuality. Antigone says: “I wasn’t born to hate; I was born to love”. (523) To love the other is to constitute the “I”. Antigone’s act of resistance (insisting to bury her brother going against the law) towards Creon is related to the relationship with her brother, to whom she is referring as “ομόσπλαγχνος” (the one who has come from the same womb) and “τὸν ἐξ ἐμῆς μητρὸς” (the one coming from my mother). Judith Butler acknowledges that Antigone is not going against the law for Polyneices himself, but for the one who holds the position of her brother, because of this relationship of kinship. The position of the brother is that produces her desire (Butler, 2000). The word brother declares and affirms this relationship: in Greek, “brother” is “ἀδελφός,” and derives from “δέλφους,” which is the “womb” or the “matrix”.

Antigone’s act of resistance demonstrates a subject to be joint, a *co-fading* which leads to the end of (her) identity as oneness and the beginning of her/their transsubjectivity. Antigone under this spell cannot be regarded a singularity, her subjectivity is partial and plural through sharing. Ettinger brings new information to the theoretical discourse on Antigone, ethics and politics by indicating that Antigone’s radical act occurs because of the mother-daughter relationship as a responsibility to the mother (Ettinger, 2000). The love of the brother is translated for Antigone as an ethical duty to act in order to defend her brother Eteocles-her father Oedipus-their mother Jocasta. Her father is also her brother having shared the same

body-space in the same womb. Antigone is taking care of her brother(s). Her grief is not singular as Butler underlines: “The brother is no singular place for her, though it may well be that all her brothers (Oedipus, Polyneices, Eteocles) are condensed at the exposed body of Polyneices” (Butler, 2000, 79).

But, what about Ismene? Antigone has her sister, Ismene, who is in life, but she chooses her brother(s) instead of her sister. An answer to that could be that Antigone asked for her sister to join her action, but she didn't. On the other side, Ismene considers herself *alone* without Antigone understanding Antigone as a partial subject that co-constitutes her subjectivity. Ismene cannot exist without Antigone; Antigone cannot exist without Polyneices. Ismene didn't follow Antigone as her deed could not be done by a woman, but only by a man. The kinship and gender trouble found in the Sophoclean Antigone can help us claim the queerness of the feminine matrixial subject.

According to the phallic paradigm of Oedipus, the heteronormative organisation is being reproduced through its symbolic structures (laws) normalizing heterosexuality and sameness and not recognizing difference. Every child born according to their biological organ/sex is given a specific position towards their desire and place in the family and identity is being structured. The law of the “Father” imposes specific gender positions and regulates sexual relations by producing a codification-repression of desire. Thus, definite positions emerge for the role of mother, father, brother, sister, imposing sexual difference through the heterosexual organisation of the family environment (Butler, 1997). Antigone by acting out her desire towards borderlinking she radically questions the symbolic law. Throughout the play, for this reason she is referred to as man. Questioning the limits of the symbolic, she expands the limits of the political engaging in the life of the city as a man: Creon: Now I am not a man, the man is she. (484) / Guard: A man buried a dead body. (245) / Creon: Who was the man who did that deed? (248)

For Lacan, Antigone's praxis of resistance and desire means her displacement from the symbolic and her placement into social death. The subject enters the symbolic sphere through the “Name of the Father”, a power that shapes the subject through prohibition. The “Name of the Father” functions as a necessary Law that imposes a specific order through the incest taboo. The acceptance of the specific Law (signifier) becomes necessary for the introduction of the subject in the symbolic, the language and the social world defining what can culturally become recognised (Butler, 2000). The Lacanian symbolic defines the liveable. Antigone by rejecting the symbolic law of the “Father” becomes socially dead.

An Ettingerian reading could claim that by going out of the Lacanian symbolic, Antigone is entering the matrixial zone. Antigone performing “a centre outside the limit” expands the space of action becoming an ethical agent-heroine that is heading through her death towards the subject-object of her desire, a praxis of resistance to the hegemonic and phallic values of

inhabiting the world. Ettinger suggests a way to enter the symbolic from a back door, or to remain in it by expanding its limits activating a non-phallic space of co-being. The matrix appears as the place where one cannot become a heroine without their relation to a special other refining the transsubjective dimension of the human subject, whose performances are of love and eros beyond sexuality.

Rethinking subjectivity through the matrixial can empower possibilities concerning the reformation not only of the self but of reality as well towards the emancipation of desires. Accordingly, a form of viewing and relating is being embraced, which does not exclude difference, acknowledging the outside as an inside. Ettinger offers us a feminine viewpoint on subject formation to overpass precarity and abjection and foster aesthetic and ethical landscapes as immersive sensorial images-events of compassion suggesting the actualisation of an enlarged subjectivity. Performance practices can thus, generate an opening to the humanised borderlinking and co-birthing capacities, and contemporary aesthetics can manifest the transition from phallic structures to the matrixial stratum of ethics and aesthetics.

References

- Bhabha, H. (1983). The Other Question: Stereotype and Colonial Discourse. *Screen*, 24(6), 18-36.
- Butler, J. (2000). *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life & Death*. Columbia University Press.
- Ettinger, B. L. (1992). Matrix and Metamorphosis. *Differences: A Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4(3), 195.
- Ettinger, B. L. (1993a). *Matrix: A Shift beyond the Phallus*. BLE Atelier.
- Ettinger, B. L. (1993b). *Matrix; Halal(a) - Lapsus: Notes on Painting*. Museum of Modern Art.
- Ettinger, B. L. (2000). Transgressing with-in-to the feminine. In F. Penny & N. Foster (Eds.), *Differential Aesthetics: Art Practices, Philosophy, and Feminist Understandings* (pp.185-209). Routledge.
- Ettinger, B. L. (2001). Wit(h)nessing Trauma and the Matrixial Gaze: From Phantasm to Trauma, from Phallic Structure to Matrixial Sphere. *Parallax*, 7(4), 89-114.
- Ettinger, B. L. (2004). Weaving a Woman Artist With-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21, 69-94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276404040480>
- Ettinger, B. L. (2006). *The Matrixial Borderspace*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Ettinger, B. L. (2020). *Matrixial Subjectivity*. In G. Pollock (Ed.), *Aesthetics, Ethics, 1990-2000: Volume 1*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jabès, E., & Ettinger, B. L. (1990). *A Threshold Where We Are Afraid*. (A. Hamad & S. Lerner, Trans.). Museum of Modern Art.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press.
- Levinas, E., & Ettinger, B. L. (1991). *Time is the Breath of the Spirit*. (J. Simas & C. Ducker, Trans.). Museum of Modern Art.

- Lyotard, J-F. (2004). Scriptures: Diffracted Traces. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21(1), 101-105.
- Pollock, G. (2006). Femininity: Aporia or Sexual Difference? In B. Massumi (Ed.), *The Matrixial Borderspace* (pp.1-37). University of Minnesota Press.
- Pollock, G. (2009). Art/Trauma/Representation. *Parallax*, 15, 40-54.
- Žižek, S. (1999) The Superego and the Act. Lecture delivered at the European Graduate School. Retrieved March 27, 2024, from <https://zizek.uk/the-superego-and-the-act/>