

BOMB Magazine — Michael Portnoy by Jovana Stokić

The artist discusses abstract games, the dangers of Relational Aesthetics and Portnoy's recent participatory work 27 Gnosis.



Michael Portnoy as “The Rigid Designator” and Ieva Misevičiūtė as Modifa “The Modifier” in the ontic sphere, during a performance at The Kitchen, March 2013. All photographs by Paula Court and provided courtesy of The Kitchen.

In *27 Gnosis*, the latest work from New York-based performance artist Michael Portnoy, language as we know it is broken down and re-introduced as a tool for discovery. Taking place inside a mauve-hued “ontic sphere”, Portnoy plays the “Rigid Designator” alongside his wife, performance artist Ieva Misevičiūtė, who appears as “Modifa, The Modifier” and together—outfitted in matching suits by designers threeASFOUR—they steer a group of participants through a game sequence led by dance, instruction, 17th-century knowledge systems, revised syntax codes, and melancholic jokes. The winners’ ideas, or results, christen a ‘gnose,’ a black, vaguely nose-like clay sculpture which is then passed onto the next group. Originally commissioned and performed for dOCUMENTA (13) last year, the work was adapted for a two-week run at The Kitchen in New York during March 2013.

Michael Portnoy I met you at one of my favorite restaurants in New York, Lucien. And you were with our common friend, Adina, who’s also from those lands in the east. Instantly, what I appreciated about you was this kind of unrestrained presentation of yourself.

Jovana Stokić Sounds awful!

MP No, you felt very real to me. A strong life force.

JS Dictatorial propensity. Similar people, when they find each other on the same side, are relieved. In the performance we are going to talk about, *27 Gnosis*, you call yourself a “Rigid Designator.” Hello? How much

more dictatorial can that be? Do we understand each other? (*laughter*). Being real is also about being open to what you are about, what artists are about, and when dealing with anything concerning performance. That kind of realism. I don't like calling it charisma—that sounds new age-y. But: The thing that draws people in. I've seen your Carrot Joke works, I understood that push and pull between the intellectual core of the piece, and the absurd, embodied individual. I was at the Armory this year, and saw Lawrence Weiner's *Pushed as if, Left as is*, and it's always like that: If there is no joke to move the meaning, then there is no art. This is what I believe conceptual art should be. Otherwise, it's preachy. Do you want to tell me about coming into participatory art? People are talking about that, these days. It's what every good exhibition needs. You've been doing it for a long time. How did you come up with this form?

MP I first used abstract games for regular communication. I moved to New York to find the people and minds that I wanted to spend time with. This was way before I was framing any of these things in a theater, or gallery.

JS So, life into art. It's a personality thing of yours, to probe social interaction.

MP This is how I found my closest friends. I'd had a longtime interest in Oulipo, and ways to set constraints for creation. Then I started organizing choreographed salons. I'd set up different zones within a space, supplying a different constraint for the interactions that happened within each of them. I was trying to engineer my perfect environment. You would enter into all these different modes of being and communication with strangers. In 2000, I did *Strangergames* at PS1. It was a cross between a chat room and a baroque dance. A hundred strangers came in and lined up in a ten by ten grid. Each received a set of envelopes containing different instructions: how they should move throughout the space to find their conversational partners, and the rules for those conversations. It created a kind of dance.

JS That sounds lovely. Did it work?

MP Very well. This nicest part was at the end: Everyone went down into the PS1 courtyard and on a card, wrote down their own instructions and rules for a conversation. Then they strung them on a long piece of string, connecting other strangers. And when those approached each other, they had rules for their interaction. It created a matrix of strangers, connected with absurdist directives.

JS A kind of open-ended structure. Did it result in any marriages?

MP I don't know. (*laughter*)

JS What I like here, and what I think is crucial, is how you play with power. Because obviously, it's about who is choreographing, orchestrating, directing, but the result is never to be known, even if you decide who the winner is. It's inherent—in how you set the rules—that you cannot control it. And I think this is the most beautiful lesson about freedom between humans. This is the most noble part of it. See: We began by talking about constraints, and now I'm bringing up moral repercussions. Let's explain about 27 *Gnosis*.

MP We're getting participants to create fictional worlds or what I call *ontic* spheres—ontic because they're not really worlds, they're too ambiguous and slippery for that. There's three stages in one game. In the beginning, we get them to create the rules for this ontic sphere. Then we get them to create a notional architecture. In the final stage, we get them to create this simple granule.

JS Which is what?

MP You go from this totalizing system down to this synthesis of all of their knowledge into this simple granule of default disjoint.

JS Somehow trying not to be essential, in its essence?

MP A disrupted essence.

JS Not solid, in its being. You're not deconstructing it, you're introducing ambiguity. This is the place of freedom for me.



Pallustrignosis, Tingognosis and Lygognosis.

MP At Documenta, the game took place within a mound of mud, which for me is really the metaphor for the sense of the game. The ground is always shifting. Quite literally: The nature of the instructions I give them is always being effaced and disintegrated.

JS They're less rigid, then. So, you're playing with a role. What would distance me from it would be an exercising of power. When you enter the ontic sphere—which is mauve—you find yourself in a position that you never take in your life. Something between lying down and standing, because you're just propped by the wall which is at an angle.

MP A kind of comfortable paralysis. This "lean" was a brilliant idea by Christian Wassmann, the architect who designed the structure.

JS Just look at the photos of your participants. There is no other way to be, because your body needs to surrender to gravity. So you're comfortable, and at the same time, you're in the position you designed us to be.

MP And at the same time, you're also one with this entire organism. So the participants' backs connect them to the structure.

JS You want them to be connected. They yield to the structure.

MP Someone likened it to the process of hypnosis. Your senses are overloaded. You're put off balance by the physical structure, by this curved floor, by the smell that we put in the room, and by our manner of addressing you. Also by this lexicon we use: Somewhat familiar, but completely alien. The effect of all of these destabilizing mechanisms is that it makes people surrender all of their habitual modes of creating

meaning. It induces a kind of trance. We are quickly trying to create a state of liberation, where people can speak faster than their brains. All of this is to make the tongue more slippery.

JS We are not looking for this pure *becoming*. We are looking for absurd shortcuts.

MP This is me poking fun at "knowledge production." And artistic research, and all those terms. From the Greek definition of *gnosis*, we're after experiential knowledge, rather than theoretical knowledge, or epistemology. A kind of dense, robust, poetic knowledge.

JS It's a lovely way to say it. And it's absurd and slippery, but not arbitrary.

MP Ieva, my wife, plays The Modifier. She ensures the quality-control in the game. It's her job to modify the way the players are thinking and speaking, to weed out any rote theorizing, lazy nonsense or words that don't have a good mouth-feel. The language and the structure of the game was influenced by my researches into 17th-century universal, or taxonomic, languages, which were created by Wilkins, Dalgarno and Leibniz—a philosopher, a linguist and a mathematician/philosopher, respectively. These languages have a small set of root words, and any meanings have to be created by combining them together. The twenty-seven gnoses we use each represent a different conceptual tool. An example is *Punctognosis*, the knowledge through lancing, or *Angiognosis*, the knowledge through containment. Propositions for each round are derived from the different combinations and placements of the gnoses on the game tables. No language in current use is truly taxonomic, in that each word shows its position in the taxonomy of the entire language. For example, in Wilkins's language, *inzi* means 'universe.' Two of the subcategories of this are *inzo* for 'water' and *inza* for 'land.' Beneath *inzo*, for instance, you have *binzo* for 'isthmus,' and *dinzo* for 'quicksand.' If you knew your roots, you'd know that *pambro*, 'wizardry,' and *fambro*, 'conspiracy,' were both capital offenses, *ambroz*, which is a type of judicial relation, *ambri*.

JS The idea of the Enlightenment was to induce order within the disorder of natural language by creating these so-called idealized languages. I think there is something utopian and noble in trying to impose this sense of order. You're pointing, also, to a place of stability and a sense of control that our multivalent, natural language—with all its dead ends—does not possess. You are bringing back that kind of embodiment in terms of your sculptural starting points. But also, it has something of a palpable sense of relief of meaning.

MP I connect with these attempts because I think they can be used for inventional aids. Leibniz's dream was to create an algebra of human thought, using roots as a kind of calculus. And you can create unfathomable worlds, by simply—

JS Computing.

MP Exactly. And so, a lot of what we're doing with the players is giving these formulas, and then asking them to see what kinds of worlds they generate through them.



The Rigid Designator (Michael Portnoy) tells a beautiful joke.

JS Let me bring you back to what you were saying about trance. I am a little bit wary when these kind of situations are created, just because it's so tainted with a 1960's liberation, primal-scream feeling of togetherness. You are doing it in a way that's not cynical, but it's aware.

MP The thing I'm most critical about in relational aesthetics is that it produces this sloppy, democratic lounging.

JS Let's not discard that whole thing, but when it's lazy, then it's like either lounging or a free-for-all good feeling.

MP The main problem is that it's replicating existing modes of discourse.

JS That's a very important point for your whole endeavor: If you replicate any kind of *expected* behavior—generating meaning, or, if you will, experience—then you're failing.

MP Exactly.

JS You set things in motion, so that it's liberating in its noble goal. But you're giving *specific* orders. You have great expectations of the audiences to participate—many performances nowadays invite participation. Michael, wanting or not, you're creating a *Gesamtkunstwerk* with the audience itself. You introduce threeASFOUR, your architect, your lighting, your and Modifa's makeup, and your choreographed behavior. Gnoses that are sculpted in a way that they respond to the notion of good form—they are not muddy. The most important aesthetic propositions are at play, because you situate yourself, beyond any doubt, within the context of a visual art production. It's highly aestheticized. Not only are we lying down and suspended in paralysis—it's bodies in space within an aestheticized environment. For me, the light that engulfs us, the color, the furniture, everything brought meaning to the whole thing.

MP The first participatory works I did were just bodies in space, with a bunch of instructions. When I started making these abstract gambling tables, they were very seductive objects, and I found that the aesthetics were used as a lure into this mode of abstract communication, which I'm looking for. People are comforted by these objects. Then they're unsettled by the dictatorial role I play, they're constantly thrown back and forth between—

JS —delight and fear (*laughter*)

MP Yes. Roger Caillois, a French sociologist, talked about four different kinds of games: Games of chance, skill, competition, and what he called *ilinx*, which are games of vertigo. A kind of voluptuous disordering of the perception.

JS You are disordering your audience to generate meanings that are unusual, and you use aesthetics. A kind of Stalinist situationist comes into play—obviously, you are facetious. You introduce enough dictatorial elements to say it's not a free-for-all, while again, going back to power: you play with it, because I think you feel good when you have it. You also make your audience aware of it. It's an interesting role to inhabit. Is it gratifying? (*laughter*)

MP Well—is it actually participation that I'm after, or are we creating a structure that seems like we want you to participate?

JS At institutions now, you have to sign some kind of release form, like if you break your leg, if they take a photo of you, this or that. In your case, participation is voluntary. People enter the ontic sphere and they don't know what will happen to them. I like that this contract does not exist. The door closes and you're inside. You give orders, you're not asking.

MP We also reward you with some pure, more passive moments too, where you can just enjoy us dancing or me telling this sad joke.



Modifa (Ieva Misevičiūtė—) outlines the formula that the four gnoses create.

JS You're turning tables on the expectations of a performer, too. Tell me about the interactions of your and Ieva's bodies in the space.

MP The root of everything we've been talking about is in dance, and my experience with dance. And writing. It's about using the strategies of dance to produce fictions, let's say. To produce writing between the audience members.

JS How did you choreograph your presence, and your and Ieva's movements, in terms of making them strange?

MP I call it abstract mime. My sense of what a joke should be is all about providing complications in the structure. Injecting elements of the sublime and the beautiful. Some of the humor I like the best is, for instance, taking a very simple task and needlessly complicating it, like *The Wise Men of Schilda*, these German folk tales. One is about these men who are attempting to change a light bulb on a lamp post, so they dig a hole into the ground to lower the lamp to the level of the street so they can remove the bulb. A lot of the dance we're doing is about these invisible obstacles and spatial impediments. The elbow has to get from point A to B, but along the path it has different things it has to overcome and—

JS You developed a kind of syntax.

MP The Forsythe technique, for instance, is about thinking of every point on the body as a point of inscription. Dancers visualize the shapes that every point and line on the body create. We add emotional obstacles, too. Each mini-vector created by the body has a different emotional effect attached to it.

JS Let me tell you how all this translates, without your explanation: with a disjointment, which to me is the equivalent to a pun. That's what I felt when I saw the piece. There was no flow, but I knew you were telling me something. These interludes come as moments of relief for the audience, as you said, but they are equally disturbing and prompting something other than just the sublime. I had the privilege to see this at the opening of Documenta where I climbed into the mud sphere, and entered the mauve environment where you did not tell any jokes. You were a strict Designator. And here now is this "level two", at The Kitchen. You introduced these incredibly gentle emotional resonances. Starting with Schubert.

MP Super melancholic.

JS Your voice, your posture, telling a story that trails off. It's not finished, but it envelops us. How did you decide to interject that?

MP Well, for this "level two", we needed some more Show, you know, capital-S, Show moments. So we had to pull out all the tricks. We also needed some relief, too, because the Documenta version was kind of relentless. We realized that the audience needed to be rewarded, and be out of the spotlight. Also for them to experience us creating these ontic spheres for them. They've done all the work so far, creating these improbable worlds. We also wanted to show them the way we would play the game.

JS What I loved, and thought was really rewarding, was that gift that you give for the winners: naming the gnoses that will be used in the next show. The participation extends to the next game. This gives meaning to the encounters, because we always hope they will open some other doors, and connect. And I think that's where you go back to the failure of artificial languages, your desire to communicate—to bridge that gap in relational aesthetics. It's a humanist thing. When people exit the sphere, they're giggling, and we have a sense of camaraderie. I believe this is the emotional core of the piece. We shared something together, and were like, "Oh, the next group will hear about our gnose!" Irrelevant in the world, but it means everything. This was my sense of redemption, of the whole thing. Because if you were just making a point about relational aesthetics, or being cynical about feel-good events, then we would be just there for you to criticize. This balance is where the piece finds its relevance.

MP That's exactly right.

JS The winners get something. Art objects are always about exchange. In this case, nothing is exchanged, the gnoses stay there. But I want to go back to the language, because this a tool that destabilizes your competitors. It was obviously influenced by analytical logic, terms that you introduce freely and absurdly.

MP There are a bunch of influences for this language. The 17th-century ontologies I mentioned. Different knowledge organization systems, from the Wilkins system—eventually used as the basis for Roget's first Thesaurus, to more recent constructed languages like Ithkuil, aUI and Ygede, to systems like OpenCyc, which is an ontological database.

JS You use them freely, but there are no explanations. It sounds familiar, but unfamiliar. It's intimidating and abstract.

MP Some of the words that I like the best in this game are from 18th-century thieves' slang. British words like *chouse* and *guddle*, that have an amazing mouth-feel. We take academic words and find their counterpart in shorter compounds, that speak of their nature. The players do have a sense of what they mean.

JS You're luring your participants with a sense of familiarity, so they think, 'Maybe this is a language that we're aware of, maybe if we pay more attention we will know.' You're bringing them from different etymologies that only *you* know, so it's *impossible* for them to know.

MP It's an experiential kind of knowledge. Once you start *using* them, you actually do know what they are. The most rewarding part in the game is seeing how these words are redefined by the audience. They use these words which they might not understand rationally to communicate with each other, create narrative and meaning. A lot of these agglutinative languages have this incantatory quality to them. When the players are developing their ideas, we play music which I made using Scriabin's mystic chord of the pleroma, which he felt induces this kind of instant apperception of the fullness of existence.

JS I'm so happy that you are mentioning Scriabin. He was all about introducing synesthesia in order to not only *confuse* the senses, but to open new ways of constructing experience and meaning. So in a *sensual*

way, not just in thinking. You're now opening the code for me.

MP It's also the scent we use too, formulated by Alessandro Gualtieri, aka Nasomatto. It's his complication, or perfection, of the most expensive scent in India, which is used in ceremonies to induce the exact same kind of experience that Scriabin was going for with his mystic chord. We're using all of these things to perform operations on the tongues of the players.

JS You call yourself rigid, but these are very subtle promptings. How does this ephemeral piece live on?

MP This is a big, big question I have: How to give objects the power of a performance. But just on a practical level, we do document the shows, and I think that's the best way to communicate what happens inside. We also have these artifacts—not the physical, like the gnosés and the structure, but the knowledge artifacts, all of the new designations that the players create.

JS You work with your life-partner and art-partner, Ieva. How has that influenced your being a designator?

MP (*laughter*) Ieva was crucial in the development of the structure and language of the game, as well as the choreography. It's very interesting to me that there's maybe a third of the game that I'm totally unaware of and which only Ieva experiences. While I am busy singing or playing the kazoo, she gets to witness and shape the formation of the players' ideas. Several people told me afterwards that they found the piece quite romantic, Ieva and I swirling about in our matching power suits, designating and modifying. Without these two very different approaches, and energies, the ontic sphere would have collapsed!

For more information on Michael Portnoy, visit his [website](#).

For more information on Ieva Misevičiūtė, visit her [website](#).

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