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# Art as ethical practice: anthropological observations on and beyond theatre

Jonas Tinius\*

*Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH),  
Department of European Ethnology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin,  
Germany*

This article discusses a central tenet of anthropological approaches to ethics, namely the notion of conduct. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with contemporary German theatre professionals, this article highlights how actors and directors within a public theatre institution cultivate artistic forms of conduct through the practice of the rehearsal. It analyses how rehearsals emerge as both spaces and practices of self-conduct, building on what actors refer to as *Haltung* – a term that simultaneously denotes attitude, posture, and conduct. Rehearsals facilitate a collective *locus* and *modus* of reflected action, suffused with the authority of the director, but ultimately aimed at training actors' capacity to make ethical and aesthetic choices. The aim of this discussion is to show how emic artistic concepts and practices may refine existing and open up new pathways for dialogue between the ethnographic study of art and the anthropology of ethics.

**Keywords:** anthropology; art; aesthetics; ethics; theatre; Germany

Die Schaubühne ist mehr als jede andere öffentliche Anstalt des Staats eine Schule der praktischen Weisheit, ein Wegweiser durch das bürgerliche Leben, ein unfehlbarer Schlüssel zu den geheimsten Zugängen der menschlichen Seele.

The stage is, more than any other public institution, a school of practical wisdom, a guide to our daily lives, an infallible key to the most secret accesses of the human soul.

Friedrich Schiller, 'Theater Considered as a Moral Institution' ('Die Schaubühne als moralische Anstalt betrachtet'), 1784

## Introduction

This article discusses a central tenet of the so-called 'ethical turn in anthropology' (Fassin 2014, 429), namely the notion of conduct. It does so on the

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\*Email: [jonas.tinius@hu-berlin.de](mailto:jonas.tinius@hu-berlin.de)

basis of long-term ethnographic fieldwork with contemporary German theatre professionals, highlighting how actors and directors within a public theatre institution cultivate artistic forms of conduct through the practice of the rehearsal. The aim of this discussion is to show how emic artistic concepts and practices may refine existing and open new pathways for dialogue between the ethnographic study of art and the anthropology of ethics.

The notion of ‘conduct’ is one of the key terms in anthropological debates on self-cultivation, specifically those building on the late work of Michel Foucault (1976, [1984] 1986, 1988, [1984] 1990a, [1984] 1990b), since it provides perspectives on the manner in which one forms oneself as an ethical subject. Focusing on ethics as a practical form of reasoning and a process of making oneself and others into reflexive human subjects with particular valued skills and qualities, or virtues, sustained debate has coalesced around the notion of cultivated conduct. The pedagogical and relational dimensions of conduct, the fact that conduct can be regarded at once as a kind of care for the self and for others, facilitates comparative ethnographic comparison with fields of artistic conduct. Crucially, then, conduct does not merely describe the improvised free play of the self. It is furthermore not meant to denote individualistic, self-centred behaviour. Instead, and rather on the contrary, the anthropological approaches to ethics that I wish to highlight here derive their understanding of the notion from Foucault’s consideration that

to ‘conduct’ is at the same time to ‘lead’ others ... and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities. The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome. Basically, power is less a confrontation between two adversaries or the linking of one to the other than a question of government. (Foucault 1982, 789)

Conduct, therefore, is neither free self-creation nor blind adherence to laws; it is instead, borrowing from Foucault’s *The Use of Pleasure* ([1984] 1990a), the manner in which one forms oneself as an ethical subject *in reference to prescriptive codes or norms*. Ethical conduct, in short, is how we decide to act ‘freely and self-reflexively’ (Faubion 2011, 3), despite – but crucially, also within and in response to – normative and relational frames.

Why then, one might ask, is it a suitable analytic for understanding art in general, and more specifically theatre, as a set of ethical practices and an ethical field? Is theatre not the realm of flat hierarchies of play, improvised creativity, and ludic freedom? In this article, I argue, building on long-term fieldwork with professional actors in a German public theatre institution, that the development of an artistic conduct – what my interlocutors described as developing a *Haltung* – is a complex process that involves

negotiating hierarchies, developing self-discipline, and dealing with artistic authority. But, I also argue, the development of *Haltung* in theatre – a German word denoting ‘conduct’, posture, and attitude – also allows for a kind of reflective freedom of action and reflected interpretation of one’s practices. Developing a form of theatrical conduct on stage in response to the critical and normative observing practices of dramaturgs, directors, and other actors and within the broader frame of an institution’s aesthetic tradition, I argue, affords and facilitates the cultivation of practical reasoning. Guiding directorial authority within rehearsals and the development of a free and reflective conduct are not contradictions. In fact, I agree with James Laidlaw (2014, 500) that ‘no coherent anthropology of ethics could be based on those oppositions’, since a responsible and freely chosen conduct in the context of acting instance is not equivalent to an absence of codes for its learning (see also Mahmood 2001). Ethical conduct for actors, as I describe it, is thus not *either* embodied or discursive, and certainly not entirely commonsensical or tacit, but cultivated and trained, within and sometimes in spite of the often critical observations that permeate rehearsals.

My observations drawn from the field of professional contemporary theatre presented in this article regard theatre as I specific ‘ethico-aesthetic field’ that can open up perspectives on how the notion of self-conduct can refine existing and open new conceptual pathways for the anthropological study of other rehearsed practices of artistic merit, such as dance, singing, or music (see Hirschkind 2006; Sax 2002). The anthropology of ethics, I argue, opens up pathways towards understanding a number of core aspects of artistic practices, especially professional ones, that go beyond the hackneyed philosophical discussion of aesthetics *as* ethics. Ethics, here, is understood not primarily as ordinary – that is, as ‘intrinsic to speech and action’ (Lambek 2010, 1) – but as a heightened attention to and work on the ways in which we act, speak, and conduct ourselves, with regard to ourselves and to others. The anthropology of art, I suggest, can suggest a great number of specific fields and practices for comparative analysis in both ordinary and extraordinary fields addressed by the anthropology of ethics. Vice versa, approaches in the anthropology of ethics have developed a powerful and coherent set of analytical and theoretical perspectives that can help refine and refocus comparative anthropological studies of art. In the recursive fashion of ethnographic inquiry, the artistic practices I describe may therefore also, in turn, illuminate what we understand by ethics.

### **Haltung and the cultivation of conduct**

At the Theater an der Ruhr – founded in 1980 by the Italian director Roberto Ciulli, the dramaturg Helmut Schäfer, and the stage designer

Gralf-Edzard Habben in the Ruhr Valley city of Mülheim an der Ruhr – the cultivation of conduct during rehearsals is a fundamental professional concern for the permanently employed acting ensemble. German city-theatres have been central, publicly funded, conduits of the Humboldtian tradition of *Bildung*, or self-cultivation through education and the arts, since their emergence in the fragmented feudal Germany of the late eighteenth century. Despite, or perhaps because of, their political instrumentalisation under both fascist and socialist regimes in the twentieth century, many German public city-theatres have since been committed to a critical educational function in German society, often with a specific local or regional audience focus. Two key pillars of the system – a semi-permanent ensemble, often changing with new directors; and a stock of plays, called the repertoire – characterise working continuities at these institutions. But few institutions have been directed for over three decades, and by their founders, in the same way as the Theater an der Ruhr, where this public educational mission – and an internal tradition borrowing from Pina Bausch and Bertolt Brecht as much as from Adorno and Hegel – has consolidated a coherent theatrical aesthetic (see Innes and Shevtsova 2013, 146). The closely knit institution employs about 50 people who are all considered part of the artistic ensemble as there is very little separation between artistic productions, administrative work, and technical set-up and workshop stage production.

For the members of the Mülheim ensemble, learning how to conduct oneself physically, emotionally, and politically during rehearsals is as much a prerequisite for what they consider ‘good’ acting as it is an aim in itself. Since this particular theatre has committed itself to employing a permanent ensemble without temporary contracts, such long-term rehearsal and ‘slow’ production processes have become a defining characteristic of the institution, as was frequently and proudly articulated to me. ‘Our insistence on self-development is a form of resistance’, director Ciulli once said to me, ‘against the commercialisation of the arts and flexible working conditions’. The process of translating intellectual hypotheses about plays to be performed from a textual template into a performance situation on stage involves a set of skills that are trained and transmitted during rehearsals: actors learn how to conduct themselves not just through physical training, but in response to theoretical concepts within literature and theatre and regular discussions among ensemble members on the political nature of reflection, which are scheduled as part of the rehearsal processes. From intense cultivation of bodily gestures or philosophical interpretations of dramatic texts, rehearsals harbour a range of pathways towards understanding art as ethical practice. They also function as what I have called ‘institution-building practices’, which ground the professional conduct of the artists partaking in them on a regular basis and constitute the public theatre institution as its core form of artistic labour



Figure 1. Rehearsals (conceptual discussions) in the foyer of the Theater an der Ruhr in the early 1980s. Photographer: Heinz Jürgen Kartenberg © Theater an der Ruhr.

in a sense that starkly differs from the precarious and flexible conditions among freelance performing artists (see Tinius 2015a, 2015b). Rehearsals are, in other words, not merely the most significant *spaces* for the training of the body and elaboration of a play. They are also *practices* for the cultivation of a particular form of comportment described by my interlocutors as *Haltung*. As I have already indicated, *Haltung* denotes both posture and attitude, but also demeanour, conduct, and comportment. It describes a set of reflected dispositions that address and inform the intellectual and corporeal conduct of actors, and of the actors in relation to others in the ensemble.

A brief excerpt from observations drawn from a phase of so-called concept-conversations (*Konzeptionsgespräche*), which precede and guide the stage rehearsals, offers a glimpse of this reciprocal reflection on conduct (Figure 1). Taking place in the foyer of the late nineteenth-century former spa villa repurposed in the mid-1990s for use as a public theatre by the Theater an der Ruhr, these pre-stage rehearsal discussions are convivial and very personal, and yet seen as important phases in which new plays take their initial shape. Excitement pervades the entire house, and I was frequently told at the beginning of my fieldwork by the

theatre pedagogue and other employees that I ‘should not miss these conversations’. But access was also not straightforward, since conversations were intimate and often critical, requiring consent from the director, trust from the actors, and prior negotiations with directorial assistants to inform me about their scheduling and content.

After months of prior participant observation in the theatre, clarifications that my intentions were not to write reviews of plays and that my work was definitively not that of a journalist, I had been ‘accepted’ into the ensemble as an anthropologist and was slowly granted more and more access until actors were eventually even asking why I had missed a conversation if I was unable to make it. One morning, while discussing their approach to Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, which was to premiere almost a year from the time of my observation, the dramaturg addressed the ensemble for this production, consisting of nine actors and a musician as well as the director, a costume designer, two seamstresses, three assistants, and three interns, seated around the large wooden table at which most text-based discussions prior to physical rehearsals take place. At this point, the part of the ensemble participating in this play had already read the play several times and were in the process of discussing the German translation, passages to be cut (to assist the dramaturg in devising a shortened ‘line-draft’ or ‘acting edition’), and the overall direction of their take on this well-known play. ‘There is obviously an official plot in the play, which every literate person can understand’, the dramaturg said to the actors, referring to the recognisable cast of characters, the plot, and the setting of the original play. ‘But’, he continued,

we need to be looking for the *inner* plot, the *Haltung* that we can develop from a play: what can we do with it that is interesting? We could begin sketching some ‘dispositions’ that we notice in the play – we can then refine those later. One interesting idea could be to *contrast the decadence of Bohemia* with the *self-tormenting self-control* of the Sicilians.

Here, the term *Haltung* was mobilised by the dramaturg to describe the way in which – psychologically, emotionally, and physically – different actors staging roles in the play would have to remind themselves of what sorts of conduct their characters represented: *decadence* on the one hand, for the cast working on Bohemia; *self-tormenting self-control* on the other, for those enacting characters from Sicily. The idea of what kind of *Haltung* each character might require – how he should conduct himself (*wie er sich verhalten soll*) – became the matter of about a week’s worth of discussions around the foyer table, and it continued during the physical rehearsals on stage.

What is important to note here is that the usage of the term *Haltung* describes not just a particular ‘interpretation’ that the director and the

dramaturg decide *for* each actor or actress. Rather, what precisely the *Haltung* of each character is – how they should conduct themselves – was supposed to be a matter of the actors' work on themselves, a process of negotiation they were invited to share and develop with the rest of the ensemble. 'Being part of an ensemble', actress Simone Thoma, who joined the Theater an der Ruhr in 1993, said to me during a break, 'is never just a matter of self-discovery or individual expression; it is rooted in what we do collectively, since the ways in which others enact their roles affect my perception of what I do and how I think about my own character, and vice versa'. The guidance on how actors were to work on themselves in preparation for these conceptual discussions is not made explicit as a rule, but conforms to agreements and guidelines transmitted indirectly over time, and becomes evident when these implicitly shared ideas of conduct are breached. It is here that the ethical dimension of professional preparation becomes more 'ordinary' than during rehearsals on stage. For conceptual discussions, the director Roberto Ciulli would sometimes ask actors to read the texts closely, contribute to discussions during the concept-conversations to reflect on the particular role of each character so that they could better justify their movements, actions, and gestures on stage later on.

Rehearsals following the conceptual discussions led by the dramaturg and director in the foyer of the theatre take place first on the dedicated rehearsal stage in a nearby depot by the industrial harbour of Mülheim – a site the theatre had rented for storage and eventually also additional rehearsal facilities. These spaces, two large rehearsal stages and several smaller offices, as well as a foyer for discussions and cigarette breaks, have a strong warehouse and industrial space character, presenting a stark contrast to the grand theatre building just a mile down the road. But they are also clearly dedicated to rehearsals, allowing stage props to be kept in place, rather than having to be moved for public performances, and allowing actors and participants to move straight into a 'rehearsal modus' without having to set up chairs, tables, water, notebooks or other relevant material.

During one of the rehearsals following the conceptual discussions led by the dramaturg and the director, I asked Fabio Menéndez, a respected core actor in his early 40s who has been with the ensemble for over 10 years, about discipline during rehearsals. We had just walked off the stage and went outside to catch some fresh air and some sunlight – and to talk without being overheard by all the others. It initially appeared to me, I confided to him, that actors were mostly listening, rather than contributing actively to the construction of a play and its specific characters' traits on which actors would later work. He shook his head and explained that the conceptual discussions were an intense part of the preparatory work for actors, since it was there that they began relating the literary content of

a play to their own physical capacities, emotional reactions, and intellectual reflections on character, plot, and the interpretation developed by a director and dramaturg. Fabio stressed that I should not conflate acting with thinking about acting, or Roberto Ciulli's directorial ideas about actors' characters with rules for their enactment:

Rehearsals are always a deliberation on a theme. You never just try to impress someone or just do something really fancy. What matters is your intense reflection on the substance of your scene, situation, role. That is what it means to develop a *Haltung*. You can't develop a proper *Haltung* without reflection, authority, or hierarchy.

*Haltung* might therefore better be translated as 'the conduct of conduct', since it describes not the finished decision about how actors and actresses should comport themselves, stand or walk in a particular situation, but rather a process of developing the *capacity* to relate to characters. This process, paradoxically, it might appear, may include adhering to hierarchies, or submitting oneself to a set discipline of reading or physical training, but developing a *Haltung* is not exhausted by these aspects. It is not used in the theater to describe a *mere* adherence to the norms put forth by the director or the dramaturg. *Haltung* also did not describe how one actor or another would *always* behave – it was not a term used interchangeably with *habitus* or habituated acting patterns. Rather, the subject of explicit reflection was the development of a capacity to act, eventually, of one's own accord. 'Acting', actress Simone Thoma said to me before a dress rehearsal, 'is *always* both thinking and acting – it is never a gesture without thought [*nie eine Geste ohne Gedanken*]'.

Simone's observation and Fabio's comments on the conceptual discussions about *Haltung* at the Theater point to an understanding of ethics that relates the practical enactment of roles to reflection on the process. The development of a *Haltung* may therefore become a self-evident part of rehearsal processes, but it would never become entirely tacit and unreflected. Moreover, actors would not reduce rehearsals, and more specifically those aspects of rehearsals aimed at developing a *Haltung*, by dividing them into phases of 'making (creating, *poiesis*), doing (action, *praxis*), and thinking (contemplation, *theoria*)', where the ethical dimension is located predominantly in actions rather than thoughts, as Aristotle does according to Lambek (2010, 14). Certain phases of the rehearsal periods focus more clearly on one rather than the other, but the process of translation from thinking into doing, the 'deliberation', as Fabio put it, cuts across these three domains. Since the kind of ethical practice cultivated in this ensemble is therefore clearly not 'ordinary', the ethical dimension of rehearsals may be described as 'the particular conjunction of

contemplative thought, reasoned action (praxis) and creative production (poiesis)' (Lambek 2000a, 309).

In contrast to Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, by which he understands doxic and unreflected behaviour ([1972] 1977), the notion of *Haltung* I develop from my interlocutors is more akin to, and has indeed been chosen as a translation for, Aristotle's notion of *héxis* (Ebert 2010, 167, n.3). In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes *héxis* as a state *directed* at reflected practical action (and therefore akin to *phronêsis*, or 'practical judgment', see Lambek (2015, 230)). German Aristotelian scholars have therefore translated *héxis* as a *Grundhaltung* or *Verhalten* (Holder 2009, 124), both terms repeatedly used during rehearsals at the Theater. I mobilise this term here, because Aristotle regards *héxis* as a kind of conduct situated between reality (what is) and possibility (what could be), pointing to its teleological and practical dimension; one that aptly resonates with how my interlocutors mobilised the notion of conduct. Holder suggests that Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* as a form of corporeal *héxis* based on practical reason necessitates a further distinction between *habitus* and *héxis*. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* ([1972] 1977), Bourdieu unhelpfully describes *héxis* as the bodily predispositions upon which a *habitus* emerges. This reasoning, however, leads to an impasse in which *héxis* remains a form of unreflected doxa, rather than a form of reasoning or social judgement *permeating* corporeal, practical, and intellectual conduct, as Aristotle conceived of it (see Laidlaw 2014, 52–55, 73–75). The philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels underlines this point with his notion of conduct (*Verhalten*), 'which', for him, 'is no longer behaviouristically limited, but integrates the interior with the exterior, meaningful intentions and corporeal mechanisms' (1980, 18). *Haltung*, or conduct, then, may offer a notion that stresses the interplay between bodily predispositions and the cultivation of reflected reasoning, which keeps the former in check and precludes *Haltung* from ever becoming habituated and tacit.

### **Rehearsing, translating, acting: artistic labour beyond the text**

If artists at the Theater an der Ruhr speak of the 'theatre-work' (*Theaterarbeit*), they refer to rehearsals. Rehearsals denote the spaces and practices for creating aesthetic imagery, characters, and narratives that end up constituting a play. Primarily, however, at the Theater, they function as steady spaces and collective means for elaborating joint ideas about theatre itself. Most standard encyclopaedias and textbooks describe rehearsals as the 'learning' of a play (*ein Stück einstudieren*, in German). In fact, until the late nineteenth century, script rehearsals used to be the *only* kind of rehearsal in most German theatre: Schiller still called rehearsals, in an 1801 letter to his companion Goethe, a

‘cycle of uniform and constantly repeating activity leading to nothing’ ([1801] 2005, 917).<sup>1</sup> This conception of theatre as the enactment of a text is based on an assumption of theatre as ‘drama’, that is, based on a dramatic text. In German city theatres since the emergence of post-dramatic theatre styles and the emerging function of theatre as a form of political commentary (see Lehmann 2006; Luckhurst 2006), dramaturgs are no longer employed merely to facilitate the translation from text to performance, but to act as in-house philosophers and historians contemplating the practice of theatre itself.

The dramaturg Schäfer at the Theater an der Ruhr embodies this shift away from a text-based theatre to one reflecting the relation between literature and performance. Associated with post-dramatic *Regietheater* (director’s theatre), which became dominant in mid-twentieth century German theatre, the original play text is merely one among the many ‘props’ for developing an intellectual argument or ‘hypothesis’ on theatre. Over the last 30 years, Schäfer has produced a plethora of books, essays, and pamphlets in which he outlines that theatre is not, as he puts it, ‘a branch of literature’ (1983). For him and Ciulli, theatre is an autonomous artistic practice that draws at least as much on sociology, philosophy, and history as it does on dramatic scripts. ‘The form of theatre we generate’, Ciulli pointed out to me, ‘can emancipate itself from every content – but it can only be generated when it becomes autonomous, when it begins to speak for itself’ (excerpt, interview). Moving away from the text as the sole source of meaningful guidance for the eventual staging of a play and towards the negotiation of performance, for instance during rehearsals, as a meaning-making space (see McAuley 1999) also shifts the creative process of acting and reflecting on acting away from playwrights and authors to actors and directors. As a consequence, the relationship between actors and directors has thus also become a more significant focus of theatre-making in contemporary German public theatre institutions like the Theater an der Ruhr.

This shift has two important implications for rehearsals. The first is practical and aesthetic. Pondering the German word for rehearsal – *Probe* – Ciulli said to me during an interview:

Rehearsals are never just a repetition [*Wiederholung*], or *répétition* [the French term for rehearsals]; they are an enactment themselves. That’s why the German word for rehearsals, *Probe*, meaning to ‘probe’ [*probieren*] is only partly right: yes, we definitively try things out and test them, but we don’t do that to prove an original idea in the text – it’s a process of creation itself, of the play and of everybody involved.

Ciulli here highlighted that to rehearse a play is as much a process of self-creation as it is one of interpretation. In other words, it is ethical as well as

aesthetic. ‘The German word *Schauspieler* (actor)’, he added, ‘is basically an insult to the profession, since we neither “play” [*spielen*] nor do we act “as if” [*zur Schau*]. The Italian notion *attori* or the English *actor* are far more appropriate, since they encompass the actual creation at the heart of acting.’ But there was also a second implication for theatre in his statement. To regard the negotiation between actors and directors, rather than the interpretation of dramatic texts, as the prime source of meaning for a play, also gives a greater weight to the *performative* aspects of rehearsals: ‘a meaningful moment’, in Ciulli’s words, ‘could emerge at any point’, which is why ‘we have to be alert’. Neither he nor the ensemble could afford a ‘lazy Haltung’, he added.

At the Theater an der Ruhr, any rehearsal process is predicated upon an initial search for ‘our own hypothesis about a play’, dramaturg Helmut Schäfer explained to me at one point. The term *hypothesis* is aptly intellectual and analytic, since this process often involves developing an initial *conceptual* or *theoretical* approach to what might be regarded as a play’s central theme. This could mean, as in fact it did, that the ensemble decides to read aspects of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* through the lens of Sigmund Freud’s concepts of *eros* and *thanatos*, the life instinct and death drive, to highlight the inner torment and psychological nature of certain characters. Such a decision is obviously important, because it influences the critical secondary literature that is discussed, the form and narrative, the costumes, or the invention of new characters to underline this new reading, as well as, crucially, the very manner in which actors prepare to conduct themselves on stage and the meaning of their theatrical gestures. Thus, the initial conceptual rehearsals and the role of the dramaturg are not detached intellectual deliberations with no bearing on acting conduct; on the contrary, they are means to problematise aspects that are already central to actors’ development of a Haltung: What is the right kind of theoretical approach to a given literary material? How does a particular reading of the play-text affect the bodily postures actors later rehearse on stage, or the kinds of relations and gestures between characters depicted on stage?

### **Practising conduct on stage**

A few months after partaking in the initial conceptual discussions described above, I was invited to attend one of the stage rehearsals for *The Winter’s Tale* in the warehouse rehearsal space. Rehearsals for this play lasted for almost an entire year in total, which was not unusual at the Theater an der Ruhr, and only moved back onto the proper stage once the stage set had been finalised. For this particular play they lasted so long, however, because Ciulli and his ensemble had developed what they described to me as a particularly complex conception that was hard

to translate into a conduct for the actors, and required frequent changes, meaning that the ensemble had to stay on the flexible rehearsal stage for as long as possible. Among the many themes treated in the play (ageing, revenge, hatred, kinship, etc.), one key subject the ensemble had elaborated was the idea of retrospection – the act of looking back at one’s life. The ensemble had decided after discussions with the dramaturg during the conceptual discussion that the entire play would be narrated and enacted as though it were a retrospective memory of one of the main characters of the play, King Leontes, the King of Sicily. In order to do so, the ensemble ‘invented’ a second character, a younger Leontes, played by actor Fabio Menéndez, who would act out the older Leontes’ life before his very own eyes. The entire play, as the conception was explained to me, would then frame the plot as a kind of play within the play.

As though this was not already complicated enough for the actors, especially the older King Leontes, played by Volker Roos, a founding ensemble member and one of the oldest actors in the theatre, the ensemble had decided to highlight a particularly tragic power relation central to the plot. Leontes does not just look back at his life, but especially at the brutal decision to have his wife Hermione killed based on the unfounded suspicion that she had an affair with a visiting friend, Polixenes, King of Bohemia. While Leontes’ – or rather, Volker Roos’ – training and the rehearsal process aimed at cultivating this form of detached retrospective gaze at one’s own former self merits its own analyses, I would like to highlight another role here that highlights the practising of conduct on stage in a different way, namely: Leontes’ wife, Hermione, acted by Dagmar Geppert.

The acting required to play Hermione was complicated because the ensemble had decided she would perform and act more like a puppet on strings than a living person. It occurred to the ensemble, following a suggestion by costume designer Elisabeth Strauss during a discussion that bridged conceptual rehearsals and scenic improvisation, that Hermione was really the subject of external power relations that tossed her around between rivalling visions of masculine kingship. To underscore this perverse situation, the ensemble suggested during a rehearsal on stage that in the play she was both a puppet of masculine power and a kind of object of sexual desire. In reference to the twentieth-century Austrian expressionist poet and painter Oskar Kokoschka, who became obsessed with a life-sized doll he created in the image of a woman who never reciprocated his love, Alma Mahler, actress Dagmar Geppert wore a costume resembling that of a doll, stitched together with visible seams (see [Figure 2](#)).

Dagmar, who joined the theatre’s ensemble in 2011, as one of the most recent new members, had deliberated with the others that she would not just ‘act like a puppet’ throughout the entire play. Rather, she was to



Figure 2. Actors Dagmar Geppert, Albert Bork, and Volker Roos during a rehearsal. Photograph by Joachim Schmitz © Theater an der Ruhr.

decide on her own, for instance, when to ‘come to life’, when to switch from a passive role into an active broker in the play’s chess game of suspicion, negotiating and thus echoing the power relations pulling the strings of her marionette-like character. Dagmar was thus faced with an intense and complicated task of conduct negotiation during rehearsals: Ciulli and the dramaturg, alongside other input from the ensemble, had set the frame for her possible courses of action, but it was left to her to navigate the improvisations during rehearsals and to act freely and in accordance with her training and understanding of the play. The gender relations, both between the characters in the play and among the actress and directors in the theatre, presented a difficult and rich focal point of discussions among the ensemble: would it appear to the audience that Ciulli and the dramaturg replicated the marionette-like imposition of male control that permeates the play, or would the reference to marionettes and puppets suffice as a critical comment? The difficulty of negotiating the relations among characters in the play was heightened by the constant possibility, also for ensemble members, of reading them as analogies of the gender relations in the theatre as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

One evening, just after a long evening rehearsal that ended around 11:30 pm, Ciulli took a few actors and Dagmar aside and talked to them before they called it a day. He invited me to join their reflection, which

he began by switching to a critical tone that is not unusual for the intimate context of the after-rehearsal discussions, and one that is reciprocal:

Dagmar, what I am asking of you is this: To form a Haltung is not to become routinised and mechanical – you must never just act like a robot doll without thoughts of her own – never just move your arms without thought, quite the opposite. You have to interrogate yourself the entire time: What does it mean to be in a liminal state, between passive creation of someone else’s will and my own agency? How does this affect your conduct on stage?

Dagmar nodded while taking some notes that evening in response to Ciulli’s directives. ‘I understand what you are saying, Roberto, I will need to play with this during our rehearsals.’ Over the course of the dozens of rehearsals that I witnessed subsequently, I noticed how she went through an entire repertoire of different doll-like gestures, shifting, sometimes during one scene or conversation, from movements that likened her to a marionette, stiff and mechanic, hung on strings, to an inflatable doll, punctured and slowly deflating, eventually collapsing, lifeless. At other times, however, her acting was eerie: she appeared as a ghost who conveyed messages, cloaked behind slow movements and fixated eyes (Figures 3–5).



Figure 3. Hermione (Dagmar Geppert) walking past the younger Leontes (Fabio Menéndez) and the older Leontes (Volker Roos) during a rehearsal. Photograph by Joachim Schmitz © Theater an der Ruhr.



Figure 4. Actress Dagmar Geppert, held by actor Fabio Menéndez, and watched by Volker Roos during a rehearsal. Photograph by Joachim Schmitz © Theater an der Ruhr.

What Dagmar rehearsed during these instances – what she *probed*, to make use of the German term for rehearsals – was how to conduct herself on stage in relation to a set of prescriptions, aesthetic and personal, provided by the ensemble and the creative directors. However, she also



Figure 5. Rehearsing gestures. Photograph by Joachim Schmitz © Theater an der Ruhr.

chose to work on her own virtuoso repertoire of physical actor training as well as her intellectual expertise and understanding of the references introduced at the earlier conceptual rehearsals, which ranged from secondary literature on Shakespeare to images of Kokoschka's Mahler doll. In short, she developed a *Haltung* – a repertoire of conduct – that ranged from intellectual to corporeal gestures and thoughts, going far beyond a mere enactment of a script. Crucially, this conduct was developed in reference to, and frequently switching back and forth between, reflected discussions on earlier interpretative ideas about her character and performed improvisations on stage. Her role, drawn from the original Shakespearean script, had taken on an entirely new dimension as a consequence of dramaturgical interventions, costume alterations, and performance-based gestural interpretations, allowing a range of possible associations to emerge, solely attached to the formation of Dagmar Geppert's development of conduct during a year's worth of rehearsals and based almost entirely on the visibility of her gestural repertoire.

This discussion provides just one particular glimpse into the long-term conduct development during professional rehearsals at the Theater an der Ruhr, a public theatre institution with a permanent ensemble and repertoire. Although unusual in the wider theatre landscape in Germany due to its closely knit ensemble structure, with professionals employed for decades in certain instances, it sheds light on particular strands within

the anthropology of ethics that may helpfully advance research in the anthropology of the arts. The rehearsal, as I have elaborated elsewhere (Tinius 2016), presents an intensely reflective space and practice for the development of ethical conduct that is peculiar in its role for theatre, but no less central in other performance-based arts, such as music, performance art, or dance.

The ethnographic situation I described above, in which an ensemble worked on shaping the conduct and meaning of a particular character through her comportment on stage, reveals snippets of a long process of deliberation on theatrical modi of reflexive acting, making, and theorising. Though suffused with the authority and gaze of a creative directorate, which guides these rehearsals, the rehearsals ultimately aim at training actors' and actresses' capacity to make informed aesthetic choices. These choices, I submit, rely on the ethical capacities developed by actors over time: their ability to judge appropriate gestures, negotiate aesthetic norms deliberated collectively, and to translate these into corporeal comportments. At the Theater an der Ruhr, actors' ability to conduct themselves (physically, emotionally, and intellectually) was the ethical precondition for 'good' acting and 'reflexive' gestures. Normative authority, collective judgement, and discussions of reasonable self-conduct were co-constructed and reciprocal in the ensemble, leading me to consider it as an instance of heightened ethical sensibility.

### **Art and ethics**

Over the last decade, this particular dimension of human life has become the subject of sustained anthropological debate, encompassed by the category of 'ethics', 'the ethical field' (Faubion 2011), or 'ethical subjects' (Laidlaw 2002, 2014). Within this debate, a number of anthropologists have taken on board a Foucauldian understanding of ethics. They did so to problematise the ways in which ethics differs from 'morality', or 'moral codes', the latter being understood by Foucault as 'a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies' (Foucault [1984] 1990a, 25). Ethical practices, by contrast, are distinct from, yet do not contradict, normative agencies of domination, pedagogy, or power (see Laidlaw 2002, 322). Ethical practices, for Foucault, denote techniques of the self and as such

they permit individuals to effect, by their own means [or with the help of others], a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power. ([1981] 2000a, 177)

Such practices of self-cultivation therefore differ starkly from what Elizabeth Anscombe (1958, 13) has called a ‘law conception of ethics’ – that is, a set of rules that prescribe a set of actions based on a Christian notion of universal moral dogma that no longer informs notions of ethics today. Instead, ethical practices of the kind intimated by Anscombe, and elaborated by Foucault, describe an ‘exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of being’; as such, they constitute a ‘conscious (*réfléchie*) practice of freedom’ (Foucault [1994] 2000b, 282–284). It is noteworthy here that for Foucault, ethical reflection denotes ‘a form of action’; for him, ethical reflection is ‘what establishes the relation with oneself and with others, and constitutes the human being as ethical subject’ (Foucault [1994] 2000b, 200, 201). It is from this conjunction of modes of action, reflection, and guidelines for transformative self-fashioning that I derive the ethical dimension of theatrical conduct. As Dagmar Geppert, Fabio Menéndez, and their discussions with Ciulli underline, *Haltung*, or the form of conduct I witnessed developing during rehearsals, conjoins aesthetic deliberation, forms of acted-out improvisation, and the emergence of gestural movements. Yet, ethical conduct is by no means a pre-existing dimension of rehearsals and theatre is thus not an ‘extraordinary’ ethical field *per se*, but constituted as such through the kinds of practices and deliberations I have outlined.

Conduct, as a central subject for an anthropology of ethics, thus opens up pathways towards core aspects of actor training and the rehearsal of a theatrical *Haltung*. In turn, the notion of *Haltung*, as an ethnographic term for a specific kind of rehearsed conduct, contributes to discussions about the constitution of ethical agents and the trained dimension of reflected subject positions. For Michael Lambek (2000b, 8), for instance, it is in the interplay between the ‘subject virtuoso and virtuous subject’ that ethical questions emerge. Ethical thought, then, denotes a form of self- and other-oriented set of actions, or at least it may lead to and be enacted in such actions. Ethical thought and ethical conduct at the theatrical rehearsals I describe above pertain to how actors can be perceived as precisely negotiating the double role as subject virtuosos and virtuous subjects that Lambek described; and they do so by refining their own physical movements in relation to other actors, other characters, but also the directorial guidance and pedagogy of directors and dramaturgs. Moreover, the notion of conduct, as I described it and as it appeared for my interlocutors, can and is deliberately scaled up and down to refer to fictional characters and real actors on stage, allowing for questions about literary texts to permeate the corporeal comportment of actors and the negotiation of their gestures and movements on stage.

Borrowing from the writings of Aristotle and Foucault, this particular way to think about ethical practices – that is to say, the anthropological

understanding of ethics to which this article speaks – stresses self-constitutive narratives and enactments of creative conduct as developed in theatre, rather than ontological assumptions of ethics as a pre-existing domain of conduct, language, or thought (see, for example, Laidlaw 2014). This anthropological debate offers a different way of looking at existing discussions in the anthropology of art. I am not suggesting that it raises entirely new questions, or answers any existing ones conclusively – a concern shared by proponents of an engagement with the ethical dimension of social life (Heywood and Laidlaw 2013) – but it allows for a consolidation of existing sets of queries about forms of self-reflection, pedagogy, and self-cultivation in the arts, both historically regarding the relation of aesthetics to morality and in the present concerning forms of post-Fordist labour (see e.g. Sansi 2015, 114). The epigraph to this article is meant as a nod to existing traditions of aesthetic reasoning and scholarship on theatre and the arts that have attended to questions of ethical cultivation and morality. It is not possible here to elaborate on the possible genealogies of German state policies concerning citizenship, political self-cultivation, and ethical deliberation through the arts, but it is evident that theatres have been institutions for both practical and theoretical reasoning on these issues for well over two centuries (see e.g. Bruford 1975 or Dumont 1994 on the concept of *Bildung*).

It is surprising, therefore, that there has not yet emerged a sustained debate about art *practices* as constitutive of ethical domains and as fields for the negotiation of ethical questions, since theatre in specific and the arts in general have long been fields where anthropologists find that ‘the people they encounter are trying to do what they consider right or good, are being evaluated according to criteria of what is right and good, or are in some debate about what constitutes the human good’ (Lambek 2010, 1). While it is arguably also the case that ‘[e]thical considerations – recognition of persons, attributions of agency and responsibility, evaluations of states of affairs are ubiquitous, and built into the very structure of language and interaction’ (Laidlaw 2014, 2), it appears sensible to me to attend to those domains of human interaction where people professionally and collectively rehearse precisely those aspects of human life that make up these ethical considerations.

### **Concluding thoughts: On an anthropology of art as ethical practice**

In this article, I addressed two of the most significant questions within this debate on ethics: who or what constitutes ethical subjects, and where or when to locate ethical practices. This second question could be rephrased as: Who or what constitutes an ethical field? I proposed two related answers to these questions.

First, I suggested that we can think of art institutions, but also organisations or collectives – such as theatres or dance groups – as ‘extraordinary’ ethical fields because of their heightened awareness of the fact that they are ethical fields. Professional theatres such as the Theater an der Ruhr not only rehearse, probe, improvise, and enact social relations that address ethical questions about conduct; they also theorise and conceptualise these relations, formulating guidelines for self-conduct and ethical reflection. The role of professionally employed pedagogues and dramaturgs, for instance, remains a field understudied in its significance for thinking through the practices that constitute extraordinary ethical domains. They are professional roles whose task it is to direct professional practices towards virtues, character traits, and artistic values negotiated in and through theatre, and therefore merit comparison with other models in which, everyday or not, circumstances are deliberately created to facilitate reflection on ethical narratives (see e.g. Mattingly 2013).

Yet an important point about the processual nature of such ethical domains needs to be stressed here. By suggesting that certain artistic practices are intensely concerned with what one may describe as ‘ethical questions’, I am not saying that these are *per se* ethical or that certain questions are internal to these practices. Rather, I wish to underline that the spaces, discourses, and practices leading to such questions, as well as the values and actions that respond to them, may *incite* subjects to work on themselves in particular ways so as to craft specific values, build their characters, or attain greater responsibility. In other words, it is the case during rehearsals as well as in many other contexts of heightened reflection that ethical ‘qualities emerge in social interaction rather than being features in any sense internal to the individual’ (Laidlaw 2014, 501).

This observation, too, explains why I refer to aspects of Aristotelian thinking within the anthropology of ethics. As James Faubion stresses, ‘Aristotle is explicit: the virtues that are the dispositional ground of ethical action do not reside in human beings *by nature*, but can and must be cultivated *only in and through practice*’ (2011, 23; my emphasis). Theatrical conduct is, to reiterate, not a form of habitus, or prefigurative bodily disposition; it is the result of training, reflection, and improvisation, all of which are the subject of the rehearsals I discussed.

Second, I sought to advance the more general claim that artistic practices can constitute forms of ethical action and that artistic training, conduct, and development are bound up with questions about ethical subject formation. In a nod to Alfred Gell (1998, 159), I am not proposing that art is intrinsically ‘a Good Thing’, but that art, as it were, condenses reflection on core ethical questions in ways that are distinctly different from but often embedded in other spheres such as politics, religion, or care. My proposal builds on the observation that professional art is, by

definition, not an ordinary everyday activity (though it can focus on these aspects, or include them as objects of artistic production), but a public profession with often rather genre-specific tasks and requirements. These may even involve the negotiation of public responsibilities, memory, or citizenship (see Crehan 2011; Ingram 2011; Lemon 2000); but even where they emphatically reject such responsibilities (Canclini 2014), artistic practices frequently inform and result from core Socratic ethical questions such as ‘How ought I to act – in relation to myself and to others?’ or ‘What kind of a person am I?’. Theatre therefore presents only one field among others for a comparative analysis of artistic practices as ethical.

In the anthropological sense, which I outline above and take as the basis of my argument, ethics denotes the capacity to act upon oneself in light of the moral codes that suffuse social life in general, and as they are negotiated in specific professional domains, such as theatre, in particular. Since there may occur slippage and misunderstanding in the usage of the notion ‘acting’ and ‘actors’ when transposing vocabulary from the anthropology of ethics into the domain of a Brechtian-inspired theatre tradition, I wish to underscore that actors in Ciulli’s ensemble theatre work on the basis of an abstraction of actions by actors during rehearsals and a reflected discrepancy of actors and roles through the context of art. While social agents in everyday settings also ‘act upon’ themselves, I take this general sense of actors as used by Faubion in the following quotation to *frame* and render visible more specific situations in which a separation is made between the actor and the character enacted. Having said this, actors work on themselves in their daily lives, as well as when taking on their roles within a play, thus rendering the following observation still pertinent on these two levels: ‘Actors who take up [...] requests and invitations [to make themselves into subjects of esteemed qualities or kinds] freely and self-reflexively’, Faubion writes, ‘are ethical actors and their distinctive domain is the ethical domain’ (2011, 3). This dynamic of call and action, self-reflection and improvisation is explicitly the modus of the extended theatre rehearsals of which I described some aspects in this article, but we know that other institutionalised and theorising artistic milieus (see Born 1995; Wilf 2014) involve similar rituals of reflection on the relation of artistic vision and disciplined conduct, or what my interlocutors describe as the formation of a *Haltung*.

During an interview I conducted with Roberto Ciulli, the long-term director of the theatre and arguably charismatic inspiration for its tradition, after one of the many intense rehearsals I witnessed during my research on the institution, I asked him about the broader significance of rehearsals for the professional formation of actors. Pondering the different translations of the German words for rehearsing and acting, he stopped and exclaimed, in Italian ‘attori!’, before saying: ‘Actors are not passive when they rehearse.’ ‘A rehearsal constitutes a process of creation itself’, he added, upon reflection. To rehearse a play, then, is as much a process

of self-creation as it is one of artistic interpretation. It is ethical as well as aesthetic. The variations and qualities of just how these two are related could be the subject of an anthropology of art as ethical practice.

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## Notes

1. Well into the nineteenth century, the custom was to have only one full rehearsal of the whole play with all the actors present, and sometimes there was no rehearsal at all. When Edmund Kean was invited to play Shylock at the Croydon Theatre, he notified the stage manager that he would not require any rehearsal, even though he knew nothing about the planned production and had not worked with the company before (Marshall 1957, 12 cited in McAuley 2012, 5).
2. Gender hierarchies in the German public theatre system, as well as the male gaze of the director, are a point of contention that has been discussed, for instance, in Dennis Hänzli's sociological analysis (2013).

## Notes on contributor

Jonas Tinius, PhD, is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH), co-funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and based at the Department of European Ethnology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany. He studied social anthropology at the Universities of Münster (Germany) and Cambridge (UK), where he also completed his PhD, entitled 'State of the Arts: German Theatre and Political Self-Cultivation' (2016). His current research explores how Berlin-based curators, contemporary artists, and art institutions engage with notions of alterity and otherness through critical curatorial strategies to reflect on German and European heritage and identities. He is editor of *Anthropology, Theatre, and Development: The Transformative Potential of Performance* (Palgrave, 2015, with Alex Flynn) and convenor of the 'Anthropology and the Arts' network of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (with Prof Roger Sansi, Barcelona, Goldsmiths).

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