Noh, or The Untimely of Our Times;
Tradition and Anachronism in/as Contemporary Art

An increasing interest in ideas of anachronism can be registered among writings of art history and theory of contemporaneity within the recent two decades or so as put forward by key figures such as George Didi-Huberman and Mieke Bal among others. Elaborating on a pithy statement by Roland Barthes—"The contemporary is the untimely"—Giorgio Agamben represents another case in point when asking *What is the Contemporary?* in his essay carrying that very question as its title initially published in 2008. As in the earlier quote from Barthes, and much recent discourse on contemporaneity and anachronism it seems, Agamben's notion of 'the contemporary' signifies far from the mere denotation of a historically present now situated within a steady chronological order. As Agamben writes:

> Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant [*inattuale*].[1]

After which we find Agamben further specifying:

> Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism.*[2]

But who are in fact 'truly contemporary' in an Agambenian sense? And what exactly does it mean to be 'untimely'—or anachronic—today? In Agamben's brief essay, we do not find much concrete response to such questions save for the propositions of a few generic terms such as 'fashion' or 'the poet'. In this paper, by contrast, I will try to revisit these fundamental questions which Agamben's text excites by focusing more specifically on a single art form, namely the Japanese Noh theatre.

Although prevailing notions of contemporaneity may seek to expand the temporal connotations of the contemporary beyond the mere moment of a specific time, our discussions of contemporary art nevertheless seem to primarily concern themselves with artworks produced within a rather restricted historical period, preferably of the recent year or two. In the course of this paper and

with reference to Agamben I hope to argue that at least the Noh theatre, but potentially any traditional art form, should be equally worthy of the 'contemporary' predicate both in spite and because of its centuries of past.

On the face of it, Noh theatre may seem to have little to do with the present, i.e. the *present* present, and may rather appear to be plainly anachronic in the sense of an art form that literally points backwards (*ana-*) in time (*kronos*). Modern scholarship, especially in the West, likewise tends to subscribe to such a view as it frequently refers to Noh as an art belonging to bygone days. American scholar Paul Varley writes, for example, in his standard history of Japanese culture:

> The noh theatre, a remnant of the medieval age, was antiquated even during the Tokugawa period [1603-1868] and, despite the authorship of new plays by certain contemporary writers, remains a drama engulfed in history and aesthetic tradition to be admired primarily by connoisseurs and by students of the classical arts.[3]

As Varley rightly notes, the vast majority of plays still performed today are of a remarkable age, dating primarily from the 14th and 15th centuries which historically mark the Noh theatre's formative period. Moreover, with more than 650 years of unbroken performance traditions, Noh is frequently heralded as one of the world's oldest dramatic art forms still alive today. Its actual historical roots can be traced even further back, with written records by monks and aristocrats documenting performances of *sarugaku*—the term which used to designate the performing art of Noh until the latter half of the 19th century—dating back more than a thousand years to at least the early Heian period (794-1185). Within the literary tradition of Noh itself, numerous secret treatises since the turn of the 14th century have been passed on in generations from master to successor relating various accounts of lore and myth which trace the origins of Noh to both the prehistoric ages of native Shinto gods as well as to the Buddha's consecration of Jetavāna Monastery in approx. the 5th century BC. As such, the temporal horizons encircling the history of Noh are indeed hard to delineate exactly.

The temporalities which unfold during a Noh play likewise tend to defy a straightforward chronology or 'chrono-logic'. Often the main character (*shite*) takes the form of a ghost or spirit of past times—in the 15th century play *Yashima,* for example, a travelling priest encounters an old fisherman at Yashima Bay who turns out to be the ghost of the young warrior, Minamoto no Yoshitsune, who famously fought the Taira clan at Yashima Bay in the late 12th century. At other

times, minutes on stage turn into days and an hour turns into months—as in, for example, the play *Kinuta,* also from the 15th century, which retells the story of a wife waiting in vain for her husband to return from time-consuming work obligations in the capital until finally dying of despair after years of longing, all of which take place within the play's duration of approx. an hour and a half.

But Noh drama is, as with any performative art form, not only a historically informed result of a past that has already been. The re-enactment of a play obviously always has to be presented anew. This ongoing oscillation between temporalities belonging to both tradition and today finds itself patently embodied in contemporary Noh performers many of whom are the direct descendants of prominent Noh families of the High and Late Middle Ages[4]. But such dialectic between past and present which the tradition of Noh can be seen to represent or, rather, *perform* can also be found deeply rooted in the aesthetics of performance that make up the art of Noh itself.

Some of the most striking articulations hereof we find in the earliest treatises ever composed on Noh acting written by Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443), the prominent Noh actor and playwright born in the mid-14th century who, along with his father Kan'ami (1333-1384), is commonly regarded as the founding father of what we know as Noh today. A key concept permeating Zeami's aesthetics and, consequently, his critical writings is the notion of 'flower' (*hana*). Broadly speaking, the flower distinguishes for Zeami the successful and talented Noh performance able to create a sensation of interest among the present audience. But more than the simple designation of something exciting, we find the notion of flower intimately entwined with a certain sense of transient timeliness and what Zeami identifies as a quality of being 'rare' (*medzurashiki*). As Zeami writes in the seventh and final book of his earliest treatise, *Fūshikaden,* completed in 1418:

> A flower, you see, is particularly appreciated for its rarity when its time comes, since it among all the trees and grasses blooms in response to the change of seasons. In *sarugaku* [Noh] as well, the mind perceives as interesting what it knows to be rare. The flower, what is interesting, and what is rare, these three all mean the same thing. Is there any blossom, after all, that does not scatter but lasts on and on? Precisely because it scatters, a blossom is rare when in bloom. In performance as well, we should, above all, recognize what does not stay the same as the flower. Rarity comes from not clinging to the same but moving on to other forms of expression.[5]

As this paragraph demonstrates, a defining property of the flower—in both a botanical and metaphorical sense—is its fundamentally impermanent state hence the sense of rareness which, as Zeami states, 'does not cling to the same' but is necessarily subject to perpetual change. This does not mean, however, that the actor must relieve her- or himself of all established practices in order to prompt her or his art to blossom. As Zeami clarifies in the later treatise, *Shūgyoku tokka,* to recognize the transience of a flower's impermanence is to recognize only one side of the coin:

> I have compared the perception of interest to a flower. This entails the perception of rareness. To push this understanding to its greatest limit is what I mean by knowing the flower. […] Now then, a flower is interesting in that it blooms and is rare in that it scatters. Someone once asked, what is the essence of impermanence? The answer: The scattering of blossoms, the falling of leaves. Again, he asked, what is eternal and incorruptible? The same answer: The scattering of blossoms, the falling of leaves, and so on and so on.[6]

The flower's act of blooming and scattering is as much a recurrent, and thus historical, event as it is novel and ever fleeting. Consequently, the Noh theatre as envisioned by Zeami is similarly rooted in a principle of balance between seemingly opposing temporalities of the reoccurring and the creative, conventional and rare. For, as we find explained in the treatise *Kakyō,* to focus only on the latter part will in effect cancel out itself and prevent any sense of true creativity, or rareness, to occur. Instead, the result becomes merely what Zeami describes with a Buddhist metaphor as *tendoku* (lit. 'spinning reading'), which Thomas Hare translates as 'superficial skimming':

> If you simply skip from one rare act to another, you will forget the basis of Noh [performance], and in this way, the rank of your performance will suffer from superficial skimming. To perform only rareness itself lacks rareness. But if you mix the new into the old, then both the old and the new will exhibit a certain rareness. This will surely be the true flower. As Confucius said, "Warm to the old and know the new. Thereby shall you be a teacher." [7]

This emphasis on a synthesis between the old and new as the true hallmark of 'rareness' occurs throughout Zeami's treatises commonly found in the sections which describe the highest rank of acting. One of the characters which Zeami makes use of in order to designate such consummate state of accomplishment is that of *ran,* 闌, which may be translated into a sense of being at the

height of something, to ripen, or to peak. This character, however, is occasionally substituted in the writings of both Zeami and his successors with the homophonic character, 乱 *ran,* of quite a different meaning; to disrupt, disintegrate, something aberrant. But if we recall Zeami's earlier statements on the rarity of the flower, it is clear that the interchangeability between the two characters should not only be regarded as an arbitrary consequence of what happens to be identical so-called *on-yomi* pronunciations; ripening includes disintegration, just like blossoming entails scattering, and vice versa.

As a brief example of how this interrelatedness of *ran* and *ran* translates into practice, we could look to the treatise, *Go'ongyoku jōjō*, which focuses strictly on modes of singing. Here Zeami classifies the highest level of singing as *rangyoku* (consummate/supreme performance):

> *Rangyoku* means a superlative singing voice. It is the rank that one reaches after having thoroughly learned the way in every sort of performance, having raised oneself above it and mixed right and wrong in a single sound to create a voice that is "similar, yet never the same."[8]

Whereas the actor must learn to master thoroughly every sort of performance, after having reached such point of consummation, one must eventually leave it behind, or 'raise above it'. Aesthetically speaking, the notions of 'right' and 'wrong' induced through enduring practice over time converge at the highest level of accomplishment and ultimately dissolve into a single sound. Temporally speaking, the result, too, defies binary categories embedded in contrasting ideas of either 'old' or 'new', or past and present, in a voice that is simultaneously both and neither or, as Zeami writes, 'similar, yet never the same'. Of course, as the earlier quotations of treatises also attest to, this non-dualism in terms of both normativity and time does not only pertain to the act of singing, but lies at the very heart of Zeami's aesthetics at all levels of acting and hence, arguably, at the heart of the Noh theatre as a tradition, too.

If contemporary art is an art that registers and articulates the contemporary condition which we find ourselves in at the present, as the organizers of this conference, for example, seem to propose[9], one might ask, then, whether contemporary art is able to register or articulate anything outside of the historical as well as imaginative boundaries of our current status quo. Just as rareness only itself lacks rareness so, too, does a singular focus on the present fail to produce any prospect for a future. For Zeami, on the other hand, the key to keeping his art alive for succeeding generations is

predicated on a continuous exchange with the past. But this past is not merely to be understood as a static entity or 'ideal' to which one must adhere as Varley's description of Noh as 'a remnant of the medieval age' suggests. Time is, like Zeami's flower, an organic form that so to speak blooms and scatters. Agambens notion of contemporaneity as '*that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*' could be understood in a similar sense; time needs the 'untimely' in order to present itself as both critical and creative potential. We could, to paraphrase Zeami, identify such present as the 'rarity' of the contemporary.

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[1] Agamben, Giorgio, "What is the Contemporary?" in *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays,* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009), 40
[2] ibid., p. 41
[3] Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 270
[4] Following Jin'ichi Konishi's periodization of medieval Japan in Jin'ichi Konishi *A History of Japanese Literature Vol. 1: The Archaic and Ancient Ages,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1984), 52
[5] Thomas Hare, trans., *Zeami: Performance Notes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 64
[6] ibid., 207
[7] Translation altered from ibid., 110 (cf. the original text in Akira Omote and Katō Shūchi, 世阿弥禅竹 *Zeami Zenchiku* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1974), p. 95-96)
[8] Hare, 226
[9] E.g., "As such our interest is […] in contemporary art forms that in different ways are concerned with the issue of temporality and constitution of subjectivity in our historical present. Fundamentally this is what makes them worthy of the predicate "contemporary", we argue.", Jacob Lund and Geoff Cox, *The Contemporary Condition: Introductory Thoughts on Contemporaneity and Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 13