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Iterations of Authorship in Martin Crimp's Theatre: *The City* and Complex Acts of Storytelling

Abstract

Authorship as an aesthetic trope, as well as means and end towards acts of self-assertion and agency, is a recurring reference in Martin Crimp's work. Recently, explorations of intertextuality have added further layers of complexity, with the narrativization of live action within the realm of the play acquiring an enhanced role through the multiplicity of authorial presences inscribed by the playwright. While this essay surveys the field of Crimp's output, its primary reference is Crimp's *The City* (2008), where the act of writing is elevated to the main plot focus and pivotal formal device. The play exists within the world of a fictional narrative: its artificiality is eventually exposed as dual – stage event for spectators gathered in the theatre, and an – ultimately – open and suspended structure of a fictional narrative, as written by Crimp's protagonist. In this article, Crimp's work is examined against a broader theorization of the author debate, engaging with seminal critical texts and relevant recent dialogues in Theatre Studies.

1. *Author, Trace, Text: The Room and the City*

Stockholm's Moderna Museet, broadly dedicated to recent and contemporary art, its legacies, historiographies and traditions, lists, amongst its numerous holdings, the installation *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries* (2006) by Swedish artist Kajsa Dahlberg (1973-), staged in a dedicated exhibition hall that also bears the inscription *Ett Eget Rum* – or, in English, *A Room of One's Own*. The space showcases the work of female artists across different forms and media of visual representation, building a narrative that emphasizes the multiple roles associated with concepts of the feminine, womanhood and creativity. The standing exhibition especially highlights processes of work, collaboration,

multitasking and existing within different spheres, private and public, at the same time, while performing different roles in domains civic, domestic and professional. Both the space and the installation are named after Virginia Woolf's seminal text (1929), with the curatorial note reading as follows:

> In "A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries" [...] Dahlberg has perused every Swedish copy of [...] *A Room of One's Own* that was available in Swedish libraries. She then traced and duplicated all the comments and underlinings that readers had made in these public copies, to make a new edition which manually transcribed reader comments from nearly fifty years of Swedish history. The new edition was printed and bound as an artist's book in one thousand copies. [...] One of the most underlined sentences by generations of readers is this: "For masterpieces are not single and solitary births: they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice".[1]

In my view, the impetus behind Dahlberg's work has been to capture how Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* has been encountered by different generations of readers and how it has intersected with their individual and collective journeys. Therefore, the act of encountering the artwork, and of logging this encounter, becomes a collective political gesture; a form of co-authoring; an act of continuation, extension and amplification, whose origin is the individual authorial voice, but whose trajectory is dispersed and multitudinous. The reader performs their intended function – they engage with the text visually and sensorially – but, beyond this, they also interpret and make additions and superimpositions on the text. That the story of *A Room of One's Own* proliferates, is, ultimately, precisely because of the individual readers, as they, ultimately, become a community, diffuse and diverse. This applies both to the physical copy of the work – those notes and inscriptions that the curator reflects on – and to the very concepts and ideas that the work develops and addresses, and which will be relevant to my discussion of Martin Crimp's play *The City*, on which this essay will go on to concentrate.

Consulting Woolf's original manuscript, available in the digital archive of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, where Leonard Woolf donated it in

1 In this quotation I am drawing on own notes. Similar descriptions are available at: Moderna Museet, "A Room of One's Own – Re-hangings in the Collection" and Moderna Museet, "Ett eget rum/tusen bibliotek".

1942, one year after his wife's death, is a humbling experience. As in Moderna Museet, the text is the exhibit – it becomes image. In Crimp's play, as I will go on to discuss, we are dealing with a similar proposition: there is the play, which we gather to see, and, within it, we encounter a woman, who is writing a fictional narrative – the very images that we experience on stage are the figments of her imagination. As the Fitzwilliam archive reveals, the above-quoted passage "For masterpieces are not single and solitary births: they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (Woolf 2015, 49), has undergone a process of drafting and redrafting, bearing its own authorial inscriptions. This, we can deduce from the manuscript, where Woolf's text appears as: "Masterpieces are not solitary births; they are the result of many years of thinking in common" (Woolf, 1929). We see that "result" has been replaced with "outcome" – but before it was "result", as the archive reveals, it had been "flower" (Woolf, 1929). "Flower" was crossed out (Woolf, 1929); we can extrapolate that "result" also was, in a subsequent draft. There is, then, a consistent move to more systematic terms. Moreover, it is remarkable that the part of the quotation that reads "of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" does not exist in the manuscript. It follows that collectivity and community are such slippery concepts that even Woolf appears cautious with them; the authorial traces reveal a muscular effort of infusing more specificity to what eventually becomes concretized as one of the staple quotations of *A Room of One's Own*. The sense of responsibility for refining and defining is palpable in the crossings out, in the fury of the handwriting, which becomes less ordered here, as Woolf establishes her own dialogue with history as a dynamic concept, meaning both past and posterity. Therefore, she emphasizes process, labour, perseverance.

"The poetic image is essentially variational", writes Gaston Bachelard (1994, xix); we might add that it takes root in different consciousnesses, different interpretative frames; it alters; it is not fixed. There is a dynamic that the beholder inscribes unto the text, or the image. It is this inscription that Woolf concentrates on where concerns the co-creation of art or literature, through a collective consciousness, even if the act of writing is solitary, or confined. The embeddedness of others has already taken place through the sharing of context. Then, it continues, rendering the text dynamic, alive – even if its fixed printed form might encourage us to think that the text is final and finite; the

same, perhaps, as with a theatrical performance that proceeds from a specific playtext. Such is the action that Woolf's readers have performed upon *A Room of One's Own* as captured by Dahlberg, while, at the same time, reflecting on own contexts, as society has been transitioning to different stages in its history: a collective superscription whereby individuals have formed a distanced and invisible yet unified and visible community on the basis of the text, adding layers to it, by annotating, by underlining. An absence metabolized into presence. In this, author, reader and audience occupy the same space and claim equal significance: they are both present in and absent from the text at the same time; both intrinsic and extrinsic. The author may disappear, but they do not evaporate; the reader/spectator may vary, but their traces linger in subsequent interpretations. In a way, as part of what Stanton B. Garner (1994, 4) might term "mutual implication", one presence forever proliferates the other.

In her recent monograph *Performances of Authorial Presence and Absence: The Author Dies Hard* (2020), Silvija Jestrovic investigates authorship as a concept and practice, proceeding from Roland Barthes's paradigm-setting essay "The Death of the Author", where authorship, by means of Barthes's phrasing alone, is given an embodied, physical presence. The author's existence – or annihilation – is an act of intricate balance, and elimination emerges as an even desirable process that entails, as a positive outcome, the emergence and empowerment of the reader. In Crimp's *The City* (2008), a woman (Clair) frames her own life as a fictional narrative, evidencing that the concept of a linear story in reality, in fiction, or, in fact, in theatre, is no longer tenable. Clair is a translator, who aspires to be an author. Her studies on a life – hers, and that of her family – are a work in progress; the storyline cannot quite hold; it is lived by actual people, but it cannot take flesh, or root.

Levels of authorship in Crimp, therefore, abound – the playwright himself, the character he creates, her duality as translator and author, the fact that she then creates an artwork, herself becoming a narrative. In this essay I argue that the act of narrativizing, and then super-narrativizing, the very role of the audience, is a crucial one. The reason for which Crimp's text emerges as a particularly suitable example rests with the fact that it takes on, as its primary focal area, the very act of authorship, which it shows as both idealistic and arduous. At the same time, Crimp's play actively opens pathways for the audience to hone and amplify their own interpretations. Moreover, that this is a text written by an author whose theatre is distinctive in both giving the

impression that it is delicately choreographed and interpretatively generous in the ways in which it creates space for the audience, is especially significant, adding further intricacy to the thematic interrogation of authorship through two genres simultaneously: the novel, which Clair is writing, and whose chapters we witness as drafts, or works in progress, and the play, in which Clair is merely a character. In their work, Dilek Inan and Ayşe Didem Yakut have provided a considerate analysis of the function of language in *The City*, which bears relevance to the concerns that the present essay concentrates on, and the theoretical framework it builds upon. As Inan and Yakut argue, "Like Beckett and Pinter, Crimp disintegrates the authorial framework. [...I] n The City, Clair's diary offers to the audiences and readers an alternative 'reality' [...] Crimp's challenging text verifies Roland Barthes's [...]. Crimp's works are largely 'writerly texts'" (2016, 78). Elsewhere, Elisabeth Angel-Perez has also engaged with correspondences between the work of Barthes and Crimp, concentrating on Crimp's language in its orality and aurality through the Barthesian concept of 'signifiance' as a mode of tracing variation and proliferation (2016). Recent work on theatre and authorship by Jestrovic will facilitate an understanding for how we might expand upon dialogues of intersection between Barthes and Crimp. The term that Inan and Yakut concentrate on, for example, acquires expanded meaning in Crimp's *The City*, where the 'writerly text' is performed viscerally, as a work in progress, and where the concept of the author is taken to task in one of the most incisive engagements with the relationship between theatre and other forms of fiction and storytelling in twenty-first century British theatre.

2. *From Authorial Narratives to Spectatorial Narrativizations*

The performativity of fiction, and the fictionalization of everyday performance – of oneself as writer, or, more significantly for the context of this paper, co-author, since it is the function that is expected of both Clair's fellow characters and the audience, remains a relevant concept. The institutional space of interaction becomes the primary locus for such performances of engagement and super-inscription. The latter persists as a concept, as such is the act that Clair performs in the context of her everyday life, which she actively narrativizes. It is significant that Crimp concentrates the action of the play in the

conceptual and imaginative space of a woman, whose creative process becomes the gravitational centre of the entire play. As Jestrovic notes:

> [...] Barthes's proposition of the 'Death of the Author' could be read in terms of a dismantling of one kind of authorial subject (e.g. white, male, Western, godlike) and a potential for construction of an alternative authorial subject – the author with a small 'a'. This opens up the possibility for us to acknowledge multiple versions of authorial subjectivity rooted in different histories and socio-political positionalities, as well as in different categories of class, gender, race, and ethnicity (2020, 30).

Such matters constitute pivotal concerns in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, whose original title, after all, and as the manuscript itself reveals, was *Women and Fiction*. This, as the archive reveals, Woolf had double underlined in the manuscript (1929). As device and compass for an elusive destination, slippery as the process itself, whose elucidation it pursues, the relationship between women and fiction, with balanced emphasis on either side of the 'and,' in a way that explores both its binary restrictions and its implicatory possibilities, appears to both challenge and invigorate Woolf. Indeed, she dedicates the entire work to discussing why this relationship has always been fraught; why concerns of access have been pivotal, but also the reasons due to which access to a protected creative space, as well as to the public realm, has been far from a reasonable assumption for women across history. Such problematics inform Crimp's play as well: Clair works as a translator, amplifying the reach of the work of others; when it comes to her own creative practice, however, the act of establishing a space both for its genesis and its dissemination is proven not only challenging, but, ultimately, unsustainable, evidencing the same pressures that have served as hindrances between women and their potential and actual production of fiction across centuries. In 2008, predating movements such as #MeToo or #TimesUp, Crimp's *The City* evidences that in the twenty-first century we still cannot make assumptions as to access when it comes to women and the creative process, not least in the face of a voracious economy that monetizes the utilitarian and functionalist aspects of one's work (in Clair's case, her translation function), while, at the same time, preventing the creative aspects from flourishing.

Amongst the characters Clair conceptualizes is a Girl, a child who displays unusual adult-like cynicism and even cruelty, and who the play, to an extent, encourages us to believe might be Clair's daughter. That Clair's

admission of her life as an elaborate concoction finds its home in a diary, that the recipient of the diary would have been a child – the daughter of a writer, who, unable to give the diary to his child gives it to Clair – but also that one of Clair's favourite created characters is the Girl that might, in a different kind of play, indeed have been her daughter, is revealing. Clair attempts to formulate a narrative to which other versions of herself – children, future women – would have the rights; they would emerge out of it and continue to develop it as writers and characters of their own lives; she would pass on the baton to the Girl, part version of herself, part fledgling character in her own right. And even though Clair in *The City* eventually has to concede the collapse of her narrative due to factors beyond her control, what strikes us in the text is the powerful play that occurs between reality and fiction, always framed through the lens of narrativity and self-narrativity. This is a gendered narrative, as it is a classed narrative – in Clair we see the female author, as we see the agent attempting to stake a claim over her own life. Both fail, but not for a lack of trying. Moreover, there is honesty in the failure: by exposing the limitations of context, personal, social and artistic, a fissure occurs, and, with it, a new opening up to reality, towards a radical truth. Now that a life has been exposed as an artificial narrative, and the individuals who inhabit it as mere characters, how does the story proceed? Or can it?

That in this piece I have chosen to concentrate on *The City* is due to the fact that this is the play that, arguably, typifies 'art-in-life' concerns most emphatically, while, at the same time, operating within a naturalist façade, even though there are, certainly, other plays that pursue similar threads. For example, *Attempts on Her Life*, or *Fewer Emergencies*, but also, to an extent, *In the Republic of Happiness*, in its sprawling middle part, take on the concept of storytelling, exploring it and stretching it to the boundaries of representation, without, at the same time, attempting to maintain a character-driven plot. These plays – as Crimp's work more broadly – demonstrate varying degrees of narrative complexity in themselves. But it is *The City* that, in its intricate interweaving of the story within the story, while also questioning the role of the author, via Clair, our expectations of a play in the theatre, as well as the author's explanatory process – here referring to Crimp – problematizes the boundaries between the novelization of life through theatrical experiment most strikingly.

3. *Life and Other Narratives: Fiction and Failure*

The City begins with a scene that is quotidian enough, one the likes of which we may have reasonable encountered in multiple other theatre narratives: a married couple are having a conversation in their home; he discusses his work; she does the same. Then, in a fashion of which Crimp's theatre is distinctive, eerie elements begin to enter the plot: the couple has a neighbour, Jenny, a nurse, whose narrations of her husband, a military doctor in an undisclosed battlefield, are both vivid and disturbing; the couple's assumed daughter, as previously mentioned, brings an uncanny combination of childish innocence and adult cruelty – in the stories she narrates, without being given straightforward evidence, we might suspect that her age is questionable; that she may be an iteration rather than a reality, an embodiment of possibilities rather than a person unto herself.

Examined against its ending, *The City* reveals itself, at least partially, in that the discomfiting sensation that the play has cultivated during performance is, in fact, wholly justified. That characters and actions do not quite add up, or that the narrative is always, to an extent, too incongruous and perhaps also elaborate, without, at the same time, having a thread robust enough to sustain it, is the outcome of the fact that Clair's imagination has failed. This is not to suggest that the attempt to narrativize has been inconsequential, or that it was not genuine. It is, rather, to suggest that in admitting defeat Crimp's protagonist delivers one of the most sincere authorial statements: that despite work and all of the best intentions, narratives may, ultimately, fail to take flesh. Importantly, this act, too, is relegated to the reader, who is voicing the author, and who also articulates a need for filling in the blanks as the reading progresses. The reader of Clair's story is Chris, "[...] *finding the words not always easy to decipher, following them with his finger. He's not a 'good' reader. He seems generally oblivious to the sense of what he's reading*" (2008, 60).

Chris. 'When I was young—much younger than now—a different person you might even say—to the person who is writing this now—and before I began to make my living from translation—taking refuge in it as one writer says "the way an alcoholic takes refuge in alcoholism"—before that I truly believed there was ...'
[...]
Chris. '... truly believed there was'—that's right—'a city inside of me—a huge and varied city [...]. And I was convinced that in this city of mine I would find an inex ...'
[...]

Chris. '... an inexhaustible source of characters and stories for my writing. I was convinced that in order to be a writer I'd simply have to travel to this city—the one inside of me—and write down what I discovered there.' (2008, 60-61)

The text is extensive and varied, capturing Clair's disappointment at being unable to reach her city as she had imagined it; to find it destroyed, drained. But, as we hear, in what is, arguably, the most distinctive and also oft-quoted segment in the play:

Chris. '... characters ... invented characters ...' (Loses his place, finds it again.) 'I invented characters and I put them in my city. The one I called Mohamed. The one I called the nurse—Jenny—she was funny. I invented a child too, I was quite pleased with the child. But it was a struggle. They wouldn't come alive. They lived a little—but only the way a sick bird tortured by a cat lives in a shoebox. It was hard to make them speak normally—and their stories fell apart even as I was telling them. [...] (2008, 62)

This, in itself, constitutes a powerful, however indirect commentary on intentionality and its unsustainability, on drafting as equally important to writing, on authorial uncertainty and perseverance without a guaranteed result, and, ultimately, on failure as a powerful and often inevitable part of the creative process. At the end of *The City*, as a character in Crimp's play, Clair is very much alive; as a character in her own ('my', as she puts it) 'city', however, Clair has vanquished, as has everyone else. Chris asks whether he, too, is an invention; Clair's affirmative reply "No more than I am, surely" (2008, 63) is an admission but also a coming to terms; a defeat, but also a finding of freedom. The text is liberated, and beyond being the author's property, it becomes equally a property of all involved, characters fictional and spectators actual, to deal with the aftermath, and piece the narrative together. If the author has died, the reader – or, here, the spectator – may arrive at their own judgements and/or conclusions. But can it be claimed that the author has truly died – their authority perished? And how might we begin to broach the narratological pluralisms that the exposure of the author as a foil might create for different audiences towards the play's plausible interpretations – not least towards a conclusion, when the play itself has not provided one?

Jestrovic begins her exploration of the author's appearance, disappearance and ultimate perseverance with a most salient point: that even the declaration of the author's death by Barthes in a context that was characterized by the bro-

ader revisionist attitude to art and life that 1968 brought proliferated the author's dominance (2020, 1). As she notes: "with the proclamation of the death of the author, the author was everywhere, even when it was difficult to separate individual voices and gestures from the collective" (2020, 2). That is, to declare the author's death is, arguably, in its surrounding controversiality and fascination as a concept, at least one of the most robust ways of generating attention, and of directing this towards the author, their possibilities and iterations. Forty years later, at the time in which Crimp's play appears, the writer has continued to emerge as an embattled, yet stronger for its continuous survival, concept. In his introductory essays to the first volume of his collected plays, Crimp presents *Four Imaginary Characters*; "The Writer" is one of them. The gesture both establishes the author as a slippery concept, a signifier, perhaps even a simulacrum, and establishes them, by means of the same generic description that evades specificity, as ever-present, active, resilient.

Crimp's engagement with Barthes creates its own sphere of fascination. In 2005, *Four Unwelcome Thoughts* appeared to address, without by any means making this explicit, the Barthesian concept of authorial death producing readerly freedom in one of Crimp's most lyrical and emotionally affective fiction sequences: "When the Writer Kills Himself". Taking place in the aftermath of a young playwright's suicide, the piece reveals how the attention that the talented, prematurely gone writer is receiving after their death from the theatre community, the critics and beyond, is, somewhat ironically, rendering them more present than ever, proving to be one of the most emphatic gestures towards attaining literary immortality. The primacy of the author by virtue of the sanctity of the space they occupy, one that comes with expectations and a certain image, is taken on by Crimp humorously in the subsequent piece – *The Writer on Holiday* (2015) – where Crimp, in dialogue with Barthes's eponymous essay (1973), appears to query that the author's function should be so monumental. It is the depiction of the writer as mere mortal that accomplishes this most resolutely, at odds with Barthes's equally witty account of the author as sensationalized specimen in mundane contexts. Barthes and Crimp are, perhaps, equally humorous, though Crimp is less distanced, and his prose reveals the engagement with not only the mortality, but, before this, the vulnerability of the author through the reality of their very humanity. Whereas Barthes writes that the proliferating image of the writer on holiday, for example, "prepares one for the same idea of the writer as a superman, as a kind of intrin-

sically different being which society puts in the window so as to use to the best advantage the artificial singularity which it has granted him" (1973, 30), Crimp is neither as disparaging of the public gaze nor as acknowledging of it.

Discussing Barthes's approach in *Roland Barthes on Roland Barthes* (1977) vis-à-vis Laurent Binet's *The 7th Function of Language* (2017), which further narrativizes Barthes, Jestrovic offers a thoughtful discussion of author and (self-)narrativization and characterization:

> [...] the text, that of Binet's novel, is the starting point, as is the case with all literary works. It is the sine qua non of Barthes's existence as a fictional character. However, the text is not all there is. [...] in Barthes's transformation from the author into the character of the novel, a performative dimension emerges. It spills over onto the text to conjure images, to embody and to make sensations of anxiety, excitement and pain palpable for the reader/beholder. The author, who makes an appearance in the text even if only to die a few pages later, is not only a semantic entity, not only a linguistic construct, but also an embodied presence, even if language is the only basis of his appearance. The intersection of text and embodiment is a fleeting one, established in the communication process, in the relationship between the work and the reader/beholder (2020, 6).

Ultimately, however, Crimp's authorial (self-) references are differentiated from Barthes's visions. In *The City*, the text challenges the spectator – but there is also an utter lack of privilege of knowledge, or of authorial authority as the end point. For example, as Chris's reading of Clair's diary reveals to us, she was exasperated when she first felt that she was failing, unable to write as she had envisaged: "Could this really be all that was inside of me? I cried at first but then I pulled myself together and tried for a while then to invent" (2008, 62). In Crimp's work, the writer as a figure may emerge as contested, exposed, even injured – but, above all, they emerge as self-reflective, aware, present – even when attempting to diffuse the consequences of this very presence, so as to share the work with others, inviting them not only into its disambiguation, but, also, its creation.

Reflecting further on the two works by Barthes and Binet, Jestrovic observes that "The relationship between text and embodiment is akin to the relationship between theatricality and performativity. Theatricality points to the artifice, artificiality, constructedness [...] to how the material has been shaped, en-plotted, to the conventions of its making" (2020, 6-7). As Jestrovic goes on to add, this is a question of "the process, the strategies, the devices, the choices

through which the author turns into a textual entity, into a fictional character and into a literary persona" (2020, 7). Such is also the path of Clair in *The City*: the charged words that Jestrovic uses here apply both to how Crimp crafts the character of Clair, and to how Clair writes herself – she both produces the text and becomes a property of it. The tense relationship between fact and fiction, or between life and its narrativization, as we witness it in *The City*, pays heed to precisely these processes and parameters. In the awkward narratological moments of the play, where Clair's story emanates theatricality and artificiality, it is the fraught attempt to embody a text that cannot take hold for factors that both condition and limit the author's imagination, as well as the directions in which she can reasonably develop her story, that promulgates the sense of unease and artifice. For example, in the final scene and before the reading of Clair's text, we hear the following from Jenny:

> Jenny. I don't know. Nothing feels right. Everything—don't you think?—seems awkward and artificial. I put these shoes on specially—but I'm not really comfortable in them—and if I'm honest, I don't know why I'm wearing them. Even a normal conversation like this—with a person I like—because I certainly like you—don't get me wrong—but even this—I don't know why—seems strained. I don't really know why I'm here at all. (2008, 56)

Lives might become en-plotted, but this does not mean that the plot might survive independently of the author's body. The author, Crimp's play shows us, is a textured and layered concept; they no more create than sustain, precisely because the text, aided by its fellow agents, the reader/spectators, acquires a life of its own.

Returning to Jestrovic, "Texts [...] don't only conjure images and bodies; they also witness, testify, incite, question and persuade" (2020, 7). Clair, then, effectively 'loses the plot'. What happens to her text is a combination of it moving into directions beyond the author's will and control, marking her life, and instigating its developments, while, eventually, leading her to the end of a road that appears inevitable. The embryonic substance of Clair's text is what we witness throughout *The City*: she initiates it, and it grows both through and in spite of her. The moment it comes to light in the ending of the play, exposed and vulnerable, it is unable to breathe. The story expires, and the author's writerly substance with it. The reader's, or, here, of course, primarily the spectator's, possibility of writerly intervention, however, remains intact – we might say that it is even amplified now that responsibility for the off-stage in-

terpretative continuation of the narrative rests only with them. Here is where witnessing becomes such a dynamic concept; here is where the audience is incited to continue the narrative. "If the main way to formulate the experience of reality is through discourse, then the only way reality and subjectivity can be textualized is indeed through the structuring devices of fiction" (2020, 8-9), notes Jestrovic. "This, however, does not make the reader's, spectator's, or semi-participant's task of completing the meaning any easier" she adds (2020, 9), in a remark regarding the fictionalization of life and the problematization of theatre's relationship with the novel, and/or its related strategies, that, in my view, directly elucidates the processes and outcomes of *The City*. And even though, as it is important to note, Jestrovic formulates these hypotheses and conclusions with direct reference to the specific works of Barthes and Binet, I am struck by their relevance to the enquiry of the present essay. The perspective that Jestrovic contributes as a theatre and performance academic is crucial to their elucidation; and to the better understanding not only of the charged intersections involving play / life / fiction / novel, but, more significantly, the spectator's freedom, role and responsibility upon encountering these. To quote Jestrovic once more: "If I, the reader/beholder, complete the meaning, who is at the other end of this process? With whom am I confabulating [...] co-creating this idea that life is (not) a novel? [...] And who am I to trust, since even the most seemingly consistent narrator is essentially unreliable and even a very raw performance of self on some level is mediated?" (2020, 9-10).

The question resonates; for all its anti-neoliberalist critique, the exposure of the bleakness that modern capitalism generates and the non-emotionalist perspective to a subject matter that is, in itself, sufficiently devastating (the collapse of relationships; marriages; entire lives) and its stretching of the concept of authorship, as if to see how far it might bend without breaking, Crimp's text is not coolly cruel, though it does expose the cruelty in the realization that one's life narrative may imply a minimal amount of agency. A narrative heart remains, and it is here that the fact that Clair is a female author, and one that performs multiple roles in both her life and her art-in-life narrative(s) becomes especially important. The question of women and space, both conceptual and physical, metaphor and reality for the relationship between women and fiction, as formulated by Woolf in the early decades of the twentieth century, remains equally pressing in the first decade of the current century, as Crimp's play reveals. Woolf exposes the issue outright:

> The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like, or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them, or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light. But when I began to consider the subject in this last way, which seemed the most interesting, I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion. [...] All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point--a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved. I have shirked the duty of coming to a conclusion upon these two questions--women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems. But in order to make some amends I am going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about the room and the money. (2015, 3)

It seems to me that to talk about Crimp's *The City* in the context of authorship and not to acknowledge the fact that we are dealing with a female author protagonist, and that this matter presents different possibilities, and different implications, would be an oversight. Woolf begins by addressing what these possibilities and implications might be broadly, before going on to trace them specifically further on in her text. In *The City*, we are faced with the trifecta that Woolf captures here; it is this that renders Crimp's play so rich, and so complex, despite its deceptive simplicity in terms of its seemingly contained plot and specific number of characters. There is, that is, variation both in the plot, and in the characters, with events interpretable in different ways, and with characters existing as potentialities of different selves, rather than as self-contained entities.

Woolf's observation as to the elusiveness of a conclusion is also a significant one: as she suggests almost one hundred years ago, and as we know holds true today, the relationship between women and fiction is fluid, due to different socio-economic-political parameters that Woolf will go on to analyse later in the work, and therefore cannot be tackled within any singular piece of writing that might claim to resolve it unequivocally. Such is, precisely, the reality that *The City* is also contending with, and which Crimp presents from an honest and engaged authorial perspective. This is, ultimately, the reason for which the play itself cannot – and does not pretend to – reach a conclusion: because the facts of the reality that this conclusion would be drawn from, and their variables, are far from fixed, and, actually, persistently elusive. And then, suddenly, almost in a playful way, all the while recognizing the significance of what is being proposed (much in the way that Clair reveals the fact that she has been attempting to write a book all along, and those present around her are

all an outcome of that attempt), Woolf's definitive, landmark statement lands: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (2015, 3). As I have discussed elsewhere, the economy, and especially, the multiple, co-ordinated impacts of neoliberalism on everyday life, are crucial factors in the failure of narrativization that Clair experiences; it is these factors that intervene; disrupt; destroy (Angelaki 2012). Clair is committed to her 'day job', as it were: being a translator provides income (not least when her husband loses his job, which may or may not be a plot twist that Clair interjects to vivify the imagination), and it also enables, at least to a certain degree, creative agency. Ultimately, however, it is the work of others that takes precedence, and Clair's own creative endeavours struggle to take root, and certainly they do not hold. Money, then, is important; the practical edges out the imaginary. And, then, space: Woolf is concerned with it from the beginning, setting it up as focal point for her enquiry.

It would also be an oversight not to note that Crimp has consistently explored spatial concerns, both in their physical and metaphorical implications, across the different genres of his work, since his beginnings as a writer. With *The City*, as is the case with other texts by Crimp, we even have a play where the spatial is elevated to the title – the strongest way of signifying that, in its multiple iterations, space becomes a plot pivot. Woolf talks about a room: a self-contained physical space that provides privacy; quiet; and that is conducive to creative labour. That space might both protect and amplify the mental space of the author, that which must be unhindered by intruding tasks and thoughts in its creative endeavours and processes. In Clair's case, the room is amplified to a city: one's home, where one, arguably belongs – that is Clair's canvas, that is Clair's 'room'. It is especially problematic, then, that the city as, once more, we learn from, Chris's reading of her diary, is not at all what Clair had been hoping for in her creative journey:

> Chris. But I knew that if I could find life in my city, and be able to describe life, the stories and characters of life, then I myself—this is what I imagined—could come alive. And I did reach my city. Yes. Oh yes. But when I reached it found it had been destroyed. The houses had been destroyed, and so had the shops. [...] I looked for inhabitants to write about, but there were no inhabitants, just dust. I looked for the people still clinging on to life—what stories they could tell!—but even there—in the drains, the basements—in the underground railway system—there was nothing—nobody—just dust. And this grey dust, like the ash from a cigarette, was so fine it got into my pen and stopped the ink reaching the page. (2008, 62)

As with the interruptions and disruptions that Woolf captures throughout *A Room of One's Own*, the obligations and commitments in a female author's life, so pedestrian reality intrudes and disrupts Clair. The play juxtaposes the possibility of life providing a private and safe sphere where the work of imagining, and of committing that imagination to paper might occur, vis-à-vis a spatial, social and economical context – a city large and voracious – that sets its own norms and expectations on the individual of a working age; the same age that, once, more, arguably, may be seen to be one's most creative. The two are, perhaps, uncompromisable – the finale of the play hints that, as much as remaining inconclusive. It is in that same vein that Woolf suggests that the relationship between women and fiction, whereby women are caregivers, nurturers and fledgling authors, attempting to provide the same kind of care and attention to a potential manuscript, is a fraught one, which does not provide the critical observer with any ease when it comes to arriving at conclusions. At the end of the previously quoted extract, Woolf makes the point that the essay itself derives from the desire "to make some amends" (2015, 3). The choice of words here is interesting: "amends" might mean both recognizing a fault and attempting to fix it (the fault not necessarily being one's own) and attempting some form of compensation while acknowledging that a full solution is not forthcoming, or at least not within the current set of circumstances.

4. *Conclusion*

As this essay has argued, it is in a comparable approach to Woolf's, that, in *The City*, Crimp recognizes and exposes the social problematics surrounding women and fiction. As Clair herself demonstrates, and as is the mood in Crimp's play, there is greater authorial integrity to be found in acknowledging that one's capabilities are not infinite on the basis of context and prevailing norms, and, therefore, to offer one's best to counteract dominant forces while shedding light on their effects, than to (pro)claim that one's authorial function comes with an elevated role that might, in fact, once and for all resolve an issue that is well beyond the individual's command. This is, ultimately, the point that Woolf makes as to the significance of the collective: artworks, like social issues, are not up to the sole individual to create, interpret and/or resolve, but to the community; and one must necessarily view oneself as part of a greater whole in

order to effect interpretation, action and change, and to reach their interventionist potential. The open-ended finale of *The City* points to that direction; the co-authorship instincts captured in the margins of the pages of Woolf's work, and, by extension, in Dahlberg's artwork, likewise. Reality is the primary narrative, after all, and it is always a matter of which narrator may have the privilege of framing it into words and actions. As Jestrovic notes: "The work of the author – whether individual or collective – remains incomplete [...] forever in search of closure. If, instead, the completion of the task depends not on the author but on the reader or spectator, the promise of closure is always in the eye of the beholder. Yet, the beholder's gaze is also unstable, impermanent; it consistently changes positions, angles, and perspectives" (2020, 12). To tell the story, then, or to at least attempt it, is an act more substantial than the story itself. Conclusions are insignificant, perhaps even undesirable and redundant; what matters more are our cross-interpretations.

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