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Killing in the Name of...

Adele Senior, University Of Exeter

'If we knew what to do, if I knew in terms of knowledge what I have to do before the decision, then the decision would not be a decision. It would simply be the application of a rule.' Jacques Derrida¹

You are standing in front of a jelly-like sculpture about the size of a coin surrounded by other audience members. The sculpture is a doll. It's one of those miniature toy dolls that take worries away. Only this doll is not weaved from cloth. It glistens with living cells. The performer next to you wears a dark grey lab coat and tells you that it's perfectly safe to touch the sculpture but the bacteria on your hands will cause it to die. It's alive! You're told that no one will be able to care for the sculpture now it's been removed from its life support and contaminated by the air. How do you act? What do you do?

About ten years ago I encountered a ritual that has now become a signature event in the work of Australia-based bioart collective, The Tissue Culture and Art Project (TC&A). This event is provocatively named the 'Killing Ritual'. During the ritual, spectators of TC&A's performance pieces are invited to touch living sculptures that have been created using the technique of tissue culture by artists Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr. The sculptures are made in a laboratory by growing animal/human tissue from existing scientific cell lines over purpose built polymer scaffolds that biodegrade as the tissue grows. The scaffolds resemble cultural artefacts that have been chosen by the artists for each of their projects: dolls, ears, jackets, and steaks. As the tissue grows, it takes on the predetermined shape of the scaffold to produce what the artists call 'Semi-Living' sculptures. Each sculpture, which is miniature in size, is staged to invite the spectator to observe and participate in different kinds of relationships with our biotechnological others: the doll invites us to secretly divulge our fears of scientific advancements by confessing our worries to it, the jacket asks us to reflect on the possibility of victimless leather whilst ironically depending on animal nutrients to survive, and the steak engages us in a relation of consumption while the frog from which the steak is grown sits watching as a trace of its body is eaten by an audience. Touching these Semi-Living sculptures is framed as a sort of 'putting to death' in the Killing Ritual.

The Derridean epigraph resonates strongly with my experience of TC&A's the Killing Ritual and continues to inform the way I think about performance and ethics. It captures the tension between calculation and the incalculable; between knowing how to act and being open to an unknowable future. Derrida's meditations on the im/possible decision and his related thoughts on responsibility, ethics, and the other are vital to understanding TC&A's ritual as a moment in performance which invites an ethically inflected decision of responsibility to and for the other that exceeds the simple application of rules. Derrida offers a vocabulary to elucidate why this ritual has angered, amused, frustrated, and intrigued colleagues, students, friends and family with whom I have discussed the spectator's possible response. Contrary to the popular critique of bioart practice, which purports that the ethical tension in TC&A's work emerges as a result of 'artists playing God', I suggest that the Killing Ritual has the ability to cause an ethical trembling because it engages the spectator in what Derrida has

identified as the aporia of the decision. By identifying the im/possible decision in the performance of the Killing Ritual, I reclaim the affirmative value in Derrida's Lévinasian notion of ethics as an invitation, rather than a limit, to act and action.

The Killing Ritual can be read as enacting the Derridean ethical dilemma because it calls for the spectator to respond by requesting her responsibility to the Semi-Living as Other. A choice has to be made: to touch or not to touch. The spectator is encouraged to make a calculation concerning how to respond to the sculptures based on the moral laws or rules implied by the ritual's moral dilemma (Thou Shalt not kill) whilst paradoxically the event demands a reinterpretation of such laws which cannot answer the singularity of the situation (is it 'killing' if the sculpture is not sentient or 'fully' alive?). The Milgram-esque lab-coat wearing authoritative figures of the artists, who stand in a makeshift laboratory in the gallery, offer guidance such as 'the semi-living will have no one to care for them', yet they cannot tell the spectator how to act. Nor do they provide a pre-existing ethical template, since there is no rulebook on how to treat 'the Semi-Living'. The ritual demands that the spectator act and thus calculation is both necessary and inadequate because how can one be sure what is the most ethical and responsible way to act in this unique situation? If I touch the sculpture it will die because of the contamination on my hands and if I do not touch the sculpture it will die because it has been removed from its sterile environment. Both options are inflected by a gesture of responsibility. On the one hand, not touching can be read as ignoring one's responsibility to the life of the Semi-Living or conversely giving responsibility back to the artists who created the sculptures. On the other hand, the spectator might choose to touch as an acceptance of her responsibility to the other that has been created by human hands or as responding to the call of the artists.

The spectator's decision cannot be reached by merely conforming to law because the context of performance enables the act of 'killing' to be partially released from the legal constraints it would undergo in both the scientific world (where the 'death' of living cells and tissue are regulated by tissue disposal protocol) and the domestic world (where the Semi-Living sculpture has no legal status as such). However, contrary to the apathy that is often levelled at undecidability, where the concept is mistakenly interpreted as indecision, the spectator is still compelled to calculate in order to make an ethical decision: she might ask 'is it considered killing if it's a collection of cells?', 'is it human or animal?', 'is it my responsibility or the artists'?' and 'whose call am I responding to: the artists' or the Semi-Living sculptures?' Yet, an ethical decision, as Derrida tells us, cannot be arrived at through calculation alone, otherwise it would constitute following a rule and therefore would not be a decision at all. Rather, the spectator is encouraged to move through the ordeal of undecidability and experience the unforeseeable that requires her to calculate and, therefore, to act. Since not touching as well as touching the Semi-Living is witnessed by an audience as an 'act' in this ritual, performance creates a space in which one can reclaim undecidability as 'the condition of possibility of acting and deciding'.ⁱⁱ

This is an opportune moment to remind ourselves that undecidability requires us both to calculate and to be open to the incalculable and therefore to act, particularly at a time when the inheritance of the ethical relation of alterity in performance studies has tended to value passivity 'on the basis that an active intervention would constitute an act of authoritarian violence'.ⁱⁱⁱ The simple acceptance of the act of touching or not touching as a form of 'violence' is thus complicated by the Killing Ritual and demands that we continue to calculate whilst paradoxically acknowledging that we can never fully know how to act responsibly or ethically. Neither Derridean deconstruction nor the Killing Ritual offer

certainties with regard to the problem of the ethical decision but in dialogue they provide a meditation on the other who is truly other (beyond an ethics that depends on a human or animal face) and remind us that, whilst we can never escape the violence of acting and deciding, one has a responsibility to seek out the lesser violence.

ⁱ Jacques Derrida, 'Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida', in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Continental Philosophy*, ed. by Mark Dooley and Richard Kearney (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 65-83 (p. 66).

ⁱⁱ John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 137.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nicholas Ridout, 'Prologue' in *A Life of Ethics and Performance*, ed. by John Matthews and David Torevell (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), pp. 7-17 (p. 14).