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Robert Walser

An Actor

A cage in the Berlin Zoo becomes a stage, and its resident lion an extremely impressive actor. Robert Walser wrote this text 100 years ago, fascinated by the animal's mighty presence and its interplay with the audience. The text as well as Erika Fischer Lichte's quote from the "Ästhetik des Performativen" below give an indication of the focus of this volume.

> "Presence is not an expressive but a purely performative quality. It is generated through specific processes of embodiment; the actor's phenomenal body rules the space, demanding the audience's attention." [1]

Very interesting is the Abyssinian Lion in the zoological gardens. He plays a tragedy and moreover in such a way that he simultaneously waxes and wanes. He despairs (nameless despair) and keeps himself nice and fat at the same time. He thrives and tortures himself to death all at once. And all this in front of a watching audience. I stood in front of his cage for a long time and couldn't tear my eyes away from the royal drama. By the way, I would like to change my profession, if this could be done quickly and easily, and become a painter of animals. I could gorge myself on painting the caged lion. Has the venerated reader ever studied the eye of an elephant? It radiates a lordliness of former worlds. But hark! What is roaring there? Ah yes, it's our dramatist. He is his own poet and his own player. Although he may look stunned at times, he never loses his composure due to his natural dignity. Both dignity and ferocity therefore. Just think, how beautiful in sleep, how grand. But just watch him as he detects feeding time approaching. Then he is reduced to the level of an impatient child, infatuated with the expectation of imminent grub. At least he has something to do then, he can tear fresh meat apart . He can truly guzzle. How such a caged animal must get to know – and somehow love – his keeper. How divine he is in repose. He seems to be in turmoil; he seems to have very particular thoughts, and I could swear that he is absorbed in sublime thoughts. Have you ever had him look at you? Try to catch his gaze. He has a divine gaze. But how different he is when he, restlessly, rubs his mighty form against the bars of the cage, walking to and fro in his prisoner's cell. To and fro. For hours on end. What a spectacle! To and fro, the mighty tail lashing the ground.

From: Robert Walser: Berlin gibt immer den Ton an. Frankfurt a.M. und Leipzig: Suhrkamp/Insel, 2006
(Translation by Susanne Even and Bernadette Cronin)

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[1] Erika Fischer-Lichte (2004): Ästhetik des Performativen. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, p. 165 (Translation of introduction and quotation by Susanne Even and Rachel MagShamhráin)