

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC - 2

Exercises

Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York
NY 10017

8 St. Ronan Terrace
New Haven
Connecticut 06511

October 28th 1973

Dear Mr. Nolte

During this past month I have been meeting the large number of people (more than a hundred) who responded to an announcement I published that I was looking for actors to work on one or more theatrical projects. The actors I saw were a mixed group - some experienced in Broadway and TV; others looking for their first professional work since leaving drama school.

My purpose was twofold: I wanted to make myself available to as many actors as possible who would be sympathetic and attuned to the kind of work I want to do; second, I wanted to start developing techniques that would come in useful in the work itself. How would these techniques affect people? Were they dramatic? Would they be any different from the many techniques currently in use in workshops and studios around the country? Whatever the answers to these questions, I thought that in the process of asking them something interesting

was bound to emerge.

Instead of auditioning actors singly, I invited them to come in groups. The numbers varied from session to session, but usually between six and nine people were present. The problem was how to audition them. In the end I decided to be empirical - to adapt some existing exercises and create a few of my own, and hope to discover as I went along which of them would draw out of the performers the qualities I wanted. I started with about a dozen different ideas; by the end of the month I was left with three or four exercises that produced consistently interesting results. The rest I discarded as too complex for an initial audition, or too esoteric for unprepared strangers.

I'd like to summarize the most (to me) significant parts of what I saw and then speculate on how it might all be interpreted.

* * * *

In one of the exercises I asked the actors to recreate - in the form of an image, a word or phrase, a scrap of music, or anything else - the experience that would induce in them that familiar sense of hackles rising, or a shiver down the spine, that one gets from certain lines of

poetry, fragments of music, a memory, a view, a painting. Though emotion is sometimes involved, this is not 'emotional memory'; it is closer to the child's sense of amazement at something mysterious and overwhelming in the world. Then I asked the actors, having evoked this experience for themselves, to try to share it with the others and convey it to them. I was looking for an ability to draw material out of oneself that had a magnetic effect for others, something of more than individual or private significance. Obviously, some people were better at this than others, but it was interesting to see which images kept recurring; for instance, some of the most powerful sensations seemed to come from scenes or fantasies in which the individual felt himself or herself expanding and merging with the cosmos, or the physical boundaries of his body becoming blurred.

In another exercise two actors were asked to perform for the rest of the group an abstract game of power. There were no rules; no words; all that was required was for each person to persuade us who were watching (the 'audience') that he or she had won. In this exercise the balance of power between two individuals became an almost tangible, measurable datum of experience. A person could have power one second and lose it the next, without any words being exchanged or

any violent action being performed. Power became a pure essence that depended on a three-way relationship - the two people involved, and the audience. The spectators became intensely involved, and sometimes the actors seemed to be drawing energy out of them. For some this was disturbing; for others it was exhilarating. For the audience, judging the result, it often uncovered secret moral and ethical premises.

The third exercise also involved intangibles. We tend to go about our daily lives as if objects and spaces were inanimate, neutral, subject to any use we care to invent for them. But suppose, for instance, that a place could have force, or energy, attached to it - could put us to use - could accept or reject us. What do the traditions of 'sacred' ground mean? Or the legend of the Arthurian "Siege Perilous"? Why do we sometimes get a feeling of discomfort if we sit in someone's favorite armchair? The exercise consisted in experimenting with the forces, if any, that might be mixed up with these feelings and stories.

In one version, an actor had to discover for himself, with no visible help from the rest, a place that the remainder of the group had selected as forbidden. In order to have something specific to work with, they chose images to project on to the space - of extreme heat, say, or cold, or mortality. Without exception, the individuals found the place, and reacted in the way that the images of the group would suggest.

There could be many explanations for this. It might be an interesting track for experimental psychologists to follow. For the time being, though, I am more concerned with the pragmatic fact that it seems to work.

* * * *

What do these, and similar exercises accomplish?
Where do they lead?

As I thought about them I noticed that they all dealt, in one shape or form, with power: power as contained in a word or an image to arouse a sensation, whether it be excitement, or repulsion; power to control the attitudes of another; power, above all, not based on physical force.

For centuries the west has been fascinated by power. Our most popular heroes are conquerors. Our slogans invoke victory, power, being Number One. We are obsessed with potency. We are constantly subjected to attempts to enthrall us - with political credos, ads, spells and incantations of all kinds. In this web political 'clout', military might, gun-toting, sexual attractiveness, and money are all woven together.

But when two people, such as the two actors in the 'Power Game' exercise, are asked to act out these images,

an interesting thing happens. Getting and holding power is not so comfortable after all. Many times I would see the actors take refuge in passivity; or put up an unassailable mask; or try to suppress feelings. Instinctively, they felt that it might be better to win by losing. Audience reactions were equally interesting. As I said before, hidden assumptions and value judgments were laid bare; which of the two was deemed to have won depended on whether you did or did not approve of the way he won.

Winning is not unalloyed pleasure. As soon as you touch on the feelings surrounding the experience of wielding power, distracting and uncomfortable associations intrude. This isn't so surprising. We are, after all, the heirs of the Christian tradition ("gentle Jesus, meek and mild"), as well as of Hercules and Superman. What is perhaps more significant is the way in which people deal with this conflict - trying to barricade themselves behind a facade of indifference, not-feeling, "self-control", a mask of coldness.

In the months to come I would like to explore, among other things, the ramifications of these ideas as they work themselves out in specific characters, situations and events of public and private life. Are our current

attitudes towards the spell-binding attractions of power immutable? Are they changing? What is the difference between power and force?

All this may come down to some quite specific images. I shall be trying to crystallize these next month. I shall also try to give you a report on an interesting program that is being undertaken at Princeton University, where the dreams of people have been explored as extensions of waking life. I am hoping to meet the people concerned and observe some of their work.

Meanwhile, in case you missed it, let me draw your attention to the words of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger:

"Americans admire the cowboy leading the caravan alone astride his horse. Without even a pistol, maybe, because he doesn't go in for shooting. He acts, that's all; aiming at the right spot at the right time. A Wild West tale, if you like ... And I am always convinced of the necessity of whatever I am doing. People feel that, believe in it. And I attach great importance to being believed: when one persuades or conquers someone, one mustn't deceive them."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kenneth Cavander". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Kenneth Cavander