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SELF-WILL. One or two reflections on my work.

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It is rarely the case that my projects involve completed productions. Performances consist mostly of a “pause” or a state that lies within a longer process, during which the project in hand develops further, changes its form, and on occasion elaborates itself over a period of several years both in terms of content as well as formally. And it is rarely the case that this “process of process” is conceptually or programmatically intended – it is often only clear to me in hindsight. Similarly with elements and forms of expression that I discover are recurrent in my work. I have developed, primarily, two formats – or better expressed two structures for analytical disputation – which are currently working me to death. I’ve named them “Essay Performance” and “Concert Performance.”

Essay-Performances

The term „Essay Performance“ refers primarily to the narrative level of each given performance and its associated material – image, video and sound – as well as to the underlying dramaturgical approach and development methods. The term is really a tool for me, one which, while it may indicate the aesthetic direction of my performances, nevertheless fails to encompass the varying theatrical and performative media that are built into the “Essay Performances”. In the “WUNDE WELT” cycle, these are the

introductory passage and the finale, in which living sculpture and body art are combined with audio drama and sound-art elements. The essayistic narrative block of the piece is interrupted by a musical interaction with the audience, combined with keyboard-driven sampled video clips.

While the essayist – as Peter Sloterdijk has it – is a navigator of unsafe waters, someone who seeks to balance sideways movements of exploration with work on an evolving thesis, in my own case I am not always necessarily trying to distill a thesis from the elaboration of my work. Working myself to death on expressions such as IDENTITY / COLONIALISATION / BORDER leads rather towards essayistic digressions in which an “evolving thesis” in the background progresses to the benefit of ever-surprising chains of association – chains in which it is possible to think together and bring together things which apparently do not belong together. This does not preclude the possibility that theses emerge from the process, just as it does not preclude such theses in turn from being put into play.

In this regard I would describe my method of material research fundamentally as “baroque excessive” – more associative than analytical. From this process, to which belong also the business of being open to and using so-called “serendipity effects”¹, there result connections which would be hard to construct from a purely conceptual standpoint. Analytical consolidation and concept reduction occur relatively late in the work process.

Distinguishing features of many of my Essay-Performances are abrupt dramaturgical change and the extreme collision of multiple narrative levels, collisions with and into images and actions. On the one hand I thereby put on the table a world of splinters and fragments, substantially held together by the performer as “moderator”; and on the other the associative spaces that arise from this process define themselves as an offer to the audience – they are challenged with the widest possible freedom of personal interpretation. My starting point is that the “true adventure” ultimately does not take place on the stage, but in the heads of guests, spectators, recipients.

Professional Dilettantism

A female advisor recently counselled me to avoid the expression “professional dilettantism” when referring to my work. There were times (the 1980s) when there was much flirtation with the concept of the “dilettantish” in art. The band, the “Einstürzende Neubauten”, were fêted as “diletante geniuses”. The spelling mistake was a key part of it. My expression “professional dilettantism” is a deliberately chosen paradox; I claim to be an expert in the inexperts.²

As I once wrote in a published work³ with reference to my Concert Performances (and what goes for the Concert Performances can in general be applied to my other performances and their variety of artistic material, that is my essay-like texts, physical performances, body art, video work etc): “I sing, although I am no singer. I make music, although I am no musician. I play ‘instruments’, although as a child and teenager I was the worst tenor horn player in the village brass band, and quite possibly the worst north of the Alps. This approach is neither original, nor does it provide any justification for undertaking Concert Performances. It’s about something else, both as to the ‘how’ and the ‘what’: fundamentally for me this is not about the pre-sentation or de-monstration of artistic abilities, which bore me in all their variations as being artificial mannerisms (and I include – along with all those things normally associated with this – certain tendencies of super-shiny Minimalist and clinical Conceptual Art in the performing arts scene). THE ILLUSION OF PERFECTION IS THE BUSINESS OF THE CULTURE INDUSTRY, NOT OF ART.

For me the point is that I should work myself to death on my chosen themes, my materials, on a particular form I have chosen, and that this working oneself to death should be visible. That means making space in the performative act for open-ness, fragility, contradictions. The point here is not an aesthetic of failure, as has been propounded as anti-model in numerous artistic theories; rather it is about splitting apart the concept of ‘the aesthetic’ itself – in favour of a productive re-flection in the first instance

on the performative act, and in consequence thereof, a reflection on the performative act that is the creation of living and/or day-to-day realities. The foreground question is no longer whether I sing well or badly, rather it is what this singing-oneself-to-death triggers in those to whom it is addressed.”

Humour

In secular terms my performance style draws on the perfidious wit and the unusual comedy that lie in Syncretism⁴, in the radical incorporation and in the exorcism of social, political and economic realities. In this way, as a performer, I am transformed into extreme-reconstructor and flow-heater of experiences of reality, a “Madness Master-Craftsman.”⁵

Art and Politics

From the perspective of today I consider it a great triumph of the artistic debates of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that we may think of art as “purposeless,” that is that art adheres to its own “self-will.” This is not for me about a Renaissance of “art for art’s sake.” Rather it is about taking up a position that opposes a socio-political appropriation of art as, for example, “social” or “political” art. Eduardo Galeano⁶ recounts the anecdote of how the Brazilian painter Cândido Portinari, obliged in 1947 to go into temporary exile in Uruguay by reason of his membership of the Brazilian Communist Party, replied as follows to a question about his opinion on “Socialist Realism”: “I really don’t know.” Adding: “I only know one thing: Art is Art, or it is shit.” Portinari thus insisted on a clear distinction between his political engagement and his artistic work. Perhaps in precisely that there lies a Utopia for the political in art: by escaping from the Leviathan of the machinery of political discourse. For this reason I consider art that insists on its artistic character – which does not exclude the incorporation of political subject matter – as frequently more politically charged than art which attempts to be political by being “political art.”

My scepticism today about “activist Art“ is stirred by the fact that it pushes an opinion or a conviction (often propped up by words) into the world – into the conflict of opinions, a true conflict, that takes place not in the first instance in art, but rather primarily in the so-called “social media.” To the point where activist art now strikes me as the extension – into an analogue reality – of this battle of opinions, and its underlying marketplace of attention-seeking.⁷

I am trying to travel a different path in my artistic work. Currently I am more interested in the uncertain processes of opinion formation than in the aggressive expression of prefab opinions.

- 1 Serendipity effect means the chance observation of something not originally sought, that reveals itself as a new and surprising discovery. [Editor's note]
- 2 According to (German) Wikipedia, the Dilettante "practises something for its own sake, that is out of interest, pleasure or passion and thus is to be distinguished from the professional. This does not prevent him from achieving complete knowledge or proficiency." That sounds quite good.
- 3 Matzke, Annemarie/Weiler, Christel/Wortelkamp, Isa (publisher): Das Buch von der Angewandten Theaterwissenschaft. Berlin/Köln: Alexander Verlag, 2012.
- 4 Syncretism is the synthesis of religious ideas or philosophies into a new system or world view. [Editor's note]
- 5 A reference to the 1955 film documentary by Jean Rouch: "Les Maitres Fous" in which Hauka priests re-enacted British colonisation while in a trance state.
- 6 Eduardo Galeano was an uruguayan journalist, essayist and writer. [Editor's note]
- 7 For instance if the „Zentrum für politische Schönheit“ practises an "aggressive humanism" (in the words of the head of the collective, Philipp Ruch) with its "flyer distribution event" "Death to the Dictator" in the Gezi Park in Istanbul in July this year, thus bringing the Collective's convictions to the fore, it meets its strategic or "aesthetically formal" mirror-image or equivalent in the actions of "Defend Europe" (and their ship the C-Star), part of the European Identitarian movement, who thereby represent a – naturally unspoken – "aggressive anti-humanism."

Otmar Wagner is a performance artist, actor and director. Most recently his work has been on show at the Steirischer Herbst in Graz, and in the Tanzquartier and the Fluc in Vienna. He will be a guest of WUK performing arts in November.