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A short History of the Wagner-Feigl Research Programme and Festivals.

Otmar Wagner & Florian Feigl

It is in the Robert-Wilson-Strasse¹ in the early 1990s that Wagner and Feigl first cross paths, at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies in the provincial German town of Gießen – a corridor of rehearsal spaces, seminar rooms, self-awareness, secretariats and student dreams. It must have been 1992: Wagner had just returned from a exhilarating 1-year intermezzo in Amsterdam², and Feigl had just lit his blue touch-paper, and was experimenting with his body; also with some rather unusual fellow-thinkers³.

Which precise synergies led to these first encounters at an artistic level can no longer be reconstructed. We know only that in late 1994 Wagner and Feigl make an appearance as performers in

1 Bob Wilson was a Guest Professor in Gießen a number of times in the course of the 1980s. As his Research Assistant, Wagner was permitted to open the current account for Wilson's salary at the Giessen savings bank. History does not relate whether he was also permitted to polish the Professor's glasses.

2 Opleiding Objekttheater at the Academy of the Arts, a short but intensive dream. This splendidly designed course, set up in 1989, had barely delineated itself before it was closed down again in 1995 for reasons of political economy.

3 From which arose the Boy Group 'Showcase Beat le Mot' (in competition, though never formally confirmed, with the virtually exactly contemporaneously formed Girl Group 'She She Pop.') Feigl then subsequently left the performance collective in 2003.

'Poems from a City,' a Nils Tabert⁴ project based on texts by Kathy Acker and staged in the Theater am Turm, in Frankfurt/Main. We know too that during this period, instead of learning their lines, Wagner and Feigl while away their hours playing darts in a comfortably equipped basement flat, a circumstance that meets with widespread lack of understanding in the Performance Scene as a whole. Many years later, in an interview⁵, Wagner elucidates as follows:

"The business with the darts-playing was not just some joke. We needed to get fit as performers. Naturally, on the one hand, you had the texts by Kathy Acker: quite important really, a sort of literary Bach, or, if you prefer, a Beethoven. But on the other hand there was also me: with my body and my brain, and that can't just be automated: it has to be trained – the attitude, the concentration, the focus. "Playing darts is absolutely no fun because it is so eternally laborious; but that is precisely why it is so important. Not only for performance art, but indeed also for each and every form of performative art – for actors, for dancers, and above all for ballet dancers. Young ballet dancers should not take up smoking in order to stay thin, but play darts to get fitter."⁶

In 1996, acting on the basis of repeatedly expressed mutual sympathy. Otmar Wagner invites Florian Feigl to take part in a joint

4 These days Nils is the head of Rowohlt Theater Verlag. As a result he is no longer obliged to contend with performers – only with performing rights.

5 This interview, under the headline "Do I make myself clear? Nothing is clear" was given to the Austrian daily newspaper "The Standard" in autumn 2018. Following a series of profoundly offensive observations on the subject of the Austrian media landscape, and in particular on the left-leaning media ("You arseholes are just servants of fascism because in reality, fat and lazy as you are, you are unwilling to entertain any kind of cultural-political counter-concept to the Vienna Opera Ball, the Burgtheater, and the Freedom Party of Austria"), an editorial decision was taken not to publish the interview.

6 The latter remark, apparently plucked at random from the air, was overtaken by reality in April 2019, in the context of a scandal at the Ballet Academy of the Wiener Staatsoper. Shenanigans, ill-treatment, and the provision of advice such as taking up smoking in order to maintain one's shape, were routine, as a special investigatory commission confirmed in December 2019.

performance entitled “wet ‘n’ wild.” Nothing is known of the content or course of this performance. The title, according to the performers, was borrowed from the description of a garishly red discount lipstick brand stocked by the German drug-store chain Rossmann, which was used to excess during the performance. Statements by Wagner and Feigl indicate that the performance might have taken an altogether different course back then had they opted for a product from the dm chain. This would admittedly have been the better ideological choice, although no one could have known at the time that the owner of dm, Götz Werner, would ten years later become a supporter of the concept of an unconditional basic income.

In 1998/89 Wagner-Feigl present the seminal show entitled “Why our performances are so fucking good” alongside the publication in the periodical “ballett International/tanz aktuell” of an article in which, under the headline “Hi(t The)Story”, they present extracts from their performance archive “The Blue Drawer.” To accompany this Feigl writes to the magazine’s editors⁸:

“Wagner and Feigl form the accompaniment to a story as it might happen, should happen, and actually happened. They have seen everything, were present for everything. So what if the only source of advice is a cookery book? Always both in the thick of it and on the sidelines: it is the very rise and fall of an assortment of high culture that we accompany. Wrong Time – Wrong Place is not a valid excuse.

Otherwise expressed, what is important is to make sure the gnomes are tastefully arranged. At what point it is then a matter of pineapple rings, or of doing the Right Thing, will be what decides who is interested – no small matter in any case ...

7 ballett international / tanz aktuell I/99, pp.28-33

8 Letter to editor Arnd Wesemann, December 17, 1998

“What we actually wanted to do was write a novel. Then we had an idea for a comic book. In the end, it wound up as an album cover. The back of the cover, to be precise. We have so many album credits to hand out that ultimately it seems unnecessary to get into what is involved in our own work. Yes indeed, the flowers are in bloom, or at least they were. We shall remember them as being so in any case. The reality is of course hardly the party where everyone want to hang out. And so long as the key to the biscuit box is still mislaid, there are only a couple of dried-out crackers left over for the whole pack of scroungers. Nevertheless, these should be carefully examined before they are divided and eaten. For years, corrosion has been replacing consecration, and that is how it should be. Welcome therefore to the party we call ScrapYard: hench Guardians of the Grail clad in sweat-soaked vests are here to welcome you, with all the charm of greasy second-hand-car salesmen, on a journey through the crusher. A bloody breeze distributes so much wit that you can barely contain your laughter. And then the Beings of Light come from outer space and rearrange what’s left into another cryptic pattern with the dimensions of a small town in Spessart.”

In their ensuing works, Wagner Feigl expand the spectrum of their performances: “Quo Vadis?”⁹ (2001) turns out to be is a mixture between Old School performance, body art, and the aesthetics of the jackass; with “Astroport Teglby – Intervention E6”¹⁰ (2002) we experience an installatory work which references both Land Art and monumental sculpture. In 2003 Wagner and Feigl

9 The press pack for “Quo Vadis?” explains: “We launch ourselves into the wide world. From where we look back at ourselves, watching ourselves as we pass through the supermarket, acquiring essentials – including of course minor thefts and the odd superfluity. “Quo Vadis” fills us; it could be the name of the unbounded whiteness at the door. But we haven’t paid for anything yet. And so we while away the hours to the next work of art. It is almost unbearable. Such a feverish, goal-oriented state of expectation conceals one or two surprises as well. We work on ourselves conscientiously with wire brushes and nail files until the moment finally comes. We become data and can then really travel.”

10 The installation comprising 666 straw bales in fields along the side of the E6 motorway in Goteborg drew zero attention in Sweden, and likewise internationally.

take part in a wrestling championship as the “Pig Boys” and suffer such traumatic defeats that it is not until 2005 – once the wounds have healed – that they are able to realise the monumental cycle “I Am Transitory, Parts 1-3.”

The latter embraces a range of formats, including Lecture/Demonstration (“Ich habe fertig” – “I am done”), Installation and Exhibition (“Theme Park Sink-Hole”), and Performance (“Sink-hology”). In “Through the Eyes of Angels” (2006) they pull off a dream-nightmare object interplay, and in “What is Theatre?” (2007) a pedagogically rewarding theatre performance.¹¹

Above all, however, the Wagner-Feigl Research Programme and Festivals down through the years developed the “Encyclopaedia of Performance Art,” a work which both as lecture-performance and in published form attracted the most attention of all their works. Unveiled in 2002 at the FU Berlin in a first draft presentation, the Encyclopaedia was further evolved on a continuous basis in the following years to 2009, extended to performance art monographs dealing among other things with the role of the motorcar in performance art, and presented at a variety of scientific conferences, theatre and festivals around Europe¹², published in international academic journals¹³ and awarded first prize in the “Performing Science” competition at the Centre for Media and Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Gießen in 2007.

11 This project, at the Theater an der Parkaue in Berlin was extremely successful and a favourite both among young people and at Theatre Studies seminars at the Freie Universität, Berlin. In spite of this the theatre performance was cancelled after only 12 shows. According to a reliable source this was the result of the artists failing to go out on the piss with the then senior Theatrical Director.

12 among others: Freie Universität, Berlin / Internationaler Theaterkongress, Hildesheim / Symposium ‚Performativity‘, Universität Kopenhagen / ‚Mustermesse 2‘, Theaterdiscounter Berlin / ‚Unfriendly Takeover‘, Frankfurt/Main / - ‚into the city‘, Wiener Festwochen / FFT Düsseldorf / Festival ‚bone 11‘, Schlachthaus Bern

13 Eg in: ‚Performance Research‘ - Vol. 11, No 2 ‚Indexes‘, 2006 and in: Barbara Büscher, Franz Anton Cramer (Hg.): ‚Fluid Access: Archiving Performance-Based Arts‘. Hildesheim: Olms, 2017

In 2009 Wagner-Feigl decide on a temporary basis that their artistic collaboration should enter a period of quiescence. The reasons for this decision appear manifold: shifts in the tectonics of love, demoralisation resulting from invariantly precarious living conditions, apparently more lucrative, newer, better offers from third parties, you name it. Resulting rumours speak of unbridgeable aesthetic differences, mutual recrimination, unforgivable insults, and acts of violence. The truth, probably, lies somewhere between the two. And on the basis that in the years that followed numerous notable invitations to theatre conferences, festivals and a meeting of the German Dramaturgical Society were turned down, it has become commonplace for protest-nostalgics to value the radical quality of this non-compliance¹⁴. The more pragmatic sneer that the reality involves a failure to agree on dates, the rubbish fees on offer, and a lack of any desire to travel.

On the other hand, those in the know insist that there are in fact project photos from these years in which Wagner and Feigl can clearly be made out together: for instance showing Wagner at a Feigl event in the Red Salon at the Volksbühne Berlin, his face half-obsured with a baseball cap bearing the inscription “I Love Corleone”; or Feigl at one of Wagner’s projects at WUK Wien, recognisable only sketchily seated at a piano at the back of the stage. Above and beyond that, eye-witnesses report sightings of Wagner and Feigl on the streets of Helsinki, disguised as panda bears. Commented Wagner-Feigl laconically:

“Were we to represent our lives so far cartographically, the Wagner-Feigl Research Programme and Festivals would show up as a region of swampland, one so sprawling and deep that any attempt to drain it would fail.”¹⁵

14 It is suggested that Wagner and Feigl’s non-compliance was above all contrived in opposition to the regimes of a new type of curator who positions him or herself as an artist centre-stage and increasingly dictates subject matter to artists, whose role is then to realise the curator’s idea, and to be mis-used as “filler” at all his or her meetings, events, symposia and festivals. Comment Wagner-Feigl: “Pure speculation!”

14 From “Wagner and Feigl are Working On It”, WUK magazine, January 2020. Online: www.wuk.at/magazin/wagner-und-feigl-arbeiten-daran/

Indeed, in the years since 2009, multiple new concepts have been evolved, for example relating to Accidents at Work and Unfitness for Work, to the History of Re-Enactment in Performance Art, and to the Aesthetics of Time (a 24-hour time laboratory/durational performance).

In 2018, exactly 20 years after “Why Our Performances are so Fucking Good,” the Wagner-Feigl Research Programme and Festival Performances commence initial planning for “Hyper-Objects? Wagner and Feigl are Working On It... Tin and Tissue I-VII.”

The atmosphere in the swampland has changed, assert Wagner-Feigl in an interview about their work¹⁶; boundary-challenging actionism has been transformed into enthusiastic melancholy coupled with the “pre-feminist patriarchal pathos¹⁷ of ageing performance artists (laughter).

¹⁶ The conversation was held on March 12th 2020 with Esther Holland-Merten during the project preparations in the WUK Projektraum.

¹⁷ The term was borrowed from a novel by Paulus Hochgatterer.

The artist **Omar Wagner** has for years been repeatedly represented in the WUK performing arts programme through his works, most recently with his "Wounded World" cycle. He can now be experienced alongside his colleague **Florian Feigl** in the „#Fernbeziehungen focus“, with a project which premieres at the sophiensaele in Berlin, and will appear in the project space on March 2020.