PERFORMING URGENCY #1
A HOUSE ON FIRE PUBLICATION

NOT JUST A MIRROR

LOOKING FOR THE POLITICAL THEATRE OF TODAY

EDITED BY
FLORIAN
MALZACHER

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ESSAYS & CONVERSATIONS

INVENTORY OF ARTISTIC STRATEGIES

The time seems out of joint. Economical disasters, outrageous social imbalance, growing right wing populism, millons of people forced into migration, various religious fundamentalisms, and unprecedented ecological catastrophes to come. But theatre — in the past often considered to be the political art per se — is struggling to find its place in the current events and debates. Unsure of how to relate to society adequately, it often seems to doubt its own political relevance. While some theatre makers seek answers still in narration-driven mimesis, others overestimate the reception-changing powers of aesthetics.

The crisis of representation in democracy has hit the representation machine of theatre at its core. But at the same time, amidst all the uncertainty and prevailing old strategies, a social and political turn in theatre has become very visible. Artists who have been engaging in their work for many years with the political struggle suddenly become the focus of attention, whereas others have just recently shifted their own work towards social, ecological, and economic issues. So how can theatre today again become a powerful medium of not only mirroring society but being a part of changing it?

For better or worse theatre has, in its forms and contents, always been an expression of its time. The Greek polis gathered in the Theatre of Dionysus to debate its values in an architectural setting that anticipated many of today's parliaments. During the Baroque period the monarch was the focal point of the performance whilst the choreography on stage was in line with the social choreography of the absolutist society. And it was not by chance that the awakening of the European bourgeoisie was accompanied by the emergence of the bourgeois theatre as an aesthetic but also cultural-political and institutional phenomenon.

The avant-gardes of the twentieth century went more than one step further when they considered theatre as a tool to challenge or even change society. The quotation borrowed as the title of this book — 'Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it' — is attributed either to Marx, Mayakovski, or Brecht, the

latter wishing for theatre to be a moral institution of class struggle where the distinction between spectator and actor would dissolve. In contrast, Antonin Artaud imagined the dissolution of this border as subversive intoxication; and the Futurists forced the audiences of their *serate futuriste* with drastic means into what we today would call participation. Even if such desires often remained more radical on paper than in practice, the most consequential theatre makers always understood theatre as a medium in which social and political practices could be tried out; in which societies in all their — actual or imagined — varieties are performed, expanded, verified, or even re-invented.

Today — after a strong period of mostly narrative theatre in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by post-dramatic forms emphasising the medium itself by focusing on its form since the 1990s — there is a strong desire for a theatre that not only gets a grip on pressing political issues but also becomes a political space, a public sphere, in itself. There is no common organum to follow. We are in a period of trying out, of finding out — artists as well as the audiences. But there are enough bits and pieces (and sometimes even big chunks) of impressive artistic work and political engagement that allow us to imagine or even feel the powerful potential of engaged theatre again. *Not Just a Mirror* takes a look at how theatre today can unfold its fundamental agonistic vigour in very different geographical, political, and artistic contexts. A potential that cannot be immediately integrated into the system nor bound to merely conceal social dysfunctions and sore spots, but that is opening spheres of negotiation and debate in which contradictions are not only kept alive but above all can be shaped and articulated.

The book opens with an introductory text outlining the situation of possible and existing political theatre today as a public sphere of social experimentation, followed by essays mapping the terrain from different topical angles. While Carol Martin takes a look at how 'the real' is presented and represented in a wide spectrum of verbatim and documentary theatre, Jeroen Peeters traces the symptoms of a new ecological thinking in current performances. Julian Boal revisits the Theatre of the Opressed that his father created and practised in Latin America in the 1960s and beyond, and shows where and how his approaches are still valuable today. A conversation between Monika Gintersdorfer and Hervé Kimenyi, Lloyd Nyikadzino, Michael Sengazi, and Franck Edmond Yao offers an insight into the often

difficult situation of performance in Ivory Coast, Congo, and Rwanda. In her very last interview, Judith Malina — legendary head and soul of the Living Theatre —together with Annie Dorsen runs the gamut over decades of artistic and political engagement, fiercely and ever-optimistically connecting the past with the present. Two essays then directly link political activism with theatre: Margarita Tsomou and Vassilis S. Tsianos analyse the theatrical and performative forms that can be found in the recent anti-austerity movements in Athens, while John Jordon gives a very personal account of his belief and disappointment in theatre as a political tool.

The second part of the book consists of 15 shorter essays by authors coming from theatre as well as political studies, philosophy, or visual arts. This section plays with the idea of an inventory of artistic strategies in progress and looks in depth and one by one at current practices, covering a wide geographical as well as aesthetic range of sometimes even contradictory approaches. Many of them are inseparable from the concrete political and social contexts the artists are involved in: Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula not only creates pieces with many references to the politics in his country but also to the infrastructure around them. The Freedom Theatre in the Palestinian refugee camp of Jenin highlights strong gestures of self-empowerment being practised over many years, while the straightforward verbatim performances of Teater.doc aim to spread information that is supressed by Russian mainstream media. Árpád Schilling's Kretakör company took the political crisis in Hungary as a call to use their own artistic know-how for direct social engagement, though in a very different way to Akira Takayama, who deals almost anthropologically with the neglected traumas of post-Fukushima Japan. The Columbian Mapa Teatro have, for more than 30 years, been poetically mixing facts with fiction in their laboratory for social imagination in the middle of Bogotá.

Who is representing whom in which way and with what right? These questions — addressed to the political systems as well as at theatre itself — are at the centre of the work made by many of the artists introduced in this book. For example, Swiss Theater Hora's actors with cognitive disabilities answer them in a very different way to Milo Rau's re-staging of three recent Russian trials against art and artists. The game of representation is pushed even further when three Slovenian artists rename themselves after the powerful nationalist politician Janez Janša, playing a complex game with identity and authorship.

Closer to straightforward activism is the Argentinian group Etcétera… , subverting real politics by confronting terrorism with their own concept of errorism. St. Petersburg collective Chto Delat? — consisting of theatre and film makers, visual artists, and philosophers — brings new life to the old Brechtian Learning Play, and the Israeli Public Movement uses choreography as a means to cut deep into the tissue of political representation, often directly intervening in the public sphere.

Expanding the stage far into the realm of news and social media by provoking vehement discussions can still be a powerful technique — as shown by Croatian theatre director Oliver Frljić, who likes to put not just his finger but his whole hand into the wounds of society. Or by the Teater NO99, who by (almost) founding their own party in the wake of Estonian general elections fuelled debates not only in the cultural sections of the newspapers, but echoed an earlier artistic project that also took the form of a political party: the legendary Chance 2000 of the late German artist Christoph Schlingensief.

Not Just a Mirror is the first part of the publication series Performing Urgency, commissioned by European theatre network House on Fire which will continue half-yearly. Performing Urgency focuses on the relationship between theatre and politics, and asks: How can theatre engage in contemporary social and political issues without compromising art or politics? What kind of knowledge or impact can art generate that activism and theory alone cannot? What are the processes and methodologies of political theatre today? It aims at a broader discussion of the conditions, aesthetics, concepts, and topics of contemporary performing arts.

This book is dedicated to Judith Malina and Christoph Schlingensief, the two late protagonists of *Not Just a Mirror*. Their presence as artists and as human beings can be felt still so strongly, as they remain core figures of the political theatre scene of today.

Florian Malzacher

ESSAYS &
CONVERSATIONS

FLORIAN MALZACHER

NO ORGANUM TO FOLLOW

POSSIBILITIES OF POLITICAL THEATRE TODAY

Some people are yelling at each other with red faces, others try to stay calm whilst convincing bystanders of the threat of foreigners taking over their country. How Austria stands alone against the rest of the world. An old man almost cries while shaking a newspaper that repeats in large letters the same discussion on its front page. Some Korean tourists watch the strange spectacle without a clue.

15 years ago, when German theatre maker Christoph Schlingensief set up his now legendary container-installation *Bitte liebt Österreich!* (*Please Love Austria!*, 2000) right in the centre of Vienna, Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel had just made his devil's pact with the right wing demagogue Jörg Haider, and the other EU-countries were discussing sanctions against the fellow member state. Austria debated passionately about immigration policy, as well as about the limits of art. And Europe watched with some bewilderment.

Under the dominating banner 'Ausländer raus' ('Foreigners out!') Schlingensief staged a *Big Brother*-type game show with asylum seekers. The containers housed a group of immigrants who could be watched via CCTV on the internet, and the Austrian population was invited to vote them out of the country one by one. The scandal was enormous: conservatives felt insulted by the seeming parody of their argumentation, and the left was disgruntled by the supposedly cynical display.

If political theatre can only exist in a context in which the world is believed to be changeable, in which theatre itself wants to be part of that change, and where there is an audience that is willing to actively engage in the exploration of what that change should be — then it becomes clear why it is so difficult to think of such a theatre today in a society paralysed by the symptoms of post-political ideologies that tend to disguise themselves as positivistic pragmatism, lachrymose resignation, or cheerful complacency. Where the credo of 'There is no alternative' (TINA) is considered common sense and the belief in the possibility or even desirability of political imagination is fading, theatre is hit at its core. All its political potential seems disabled.

It was a different time in the 1970s and 1980s when political theatre in Europe actually was (in different ways on either side of

the Wall) a relevant factor in many public debates. With ideologies still going strong and the division between east and west clear cut, theatre engaged in everyday politics by representing all the world's miseries — from the Vietnam War or Apartheid in South Africa to the small daily adversities of a local working class family. Either in new drama or modernised classics, radical interpretations of the text were a key feature of a Regietheater (director's theatre) which, despite its many new approaches, stayed mostly in the realm of the mimetic. In the east it was a game with hidden messages, in the west open provocations were an important part of the repertoire, and audiences slamming doors while leaving was a rule rather than an exception.

No wonder that large parts of the public still consider this period almost synonymous with 'political theatre' itself. But even though the theatre during this period was often able to propose an understanding of the structural reasons behind the presented evils, it couldn't avoid the dilemma that in the end its representations were just another repetition of the very miseries it wanted to fight. Brecht called this phenomenon 'Menschenfresserdramatik' ('cannibal's dramatic art'), which he described in the early 1930s in his notes on *Die dialektische Dramatik*: 'The physical exploitation of the poor is followed by a psychological one' when the pitied character is supposed to produce feelings of sadness, guilt or even anger in a spectator, who most likely — at least structurally — is part of keeping the very system of exploitation alive. In the end they continued what Brecht had already analysed in his *Short Organum for the Theatre* (1949): 'The theatre we know shows the structure of society (represented on the stage) as incapable of being influenced by society (in the auditorium).' Not only the play onstage but the whole theatrical set up (not to speak of the hierarchies within the institution itself) merely reproduced the system they wanted to criticise.

In the 1980s and particularly into the 1990s new forms of theatre emerged with the aim not just to reform the predominant models but to revolutionise them from outside the established theatre institutions and traditions. Post-dramatic theatre, devised theatre, performance theatre — there are many labels for this genre which is still difficult to clearly define due to its variety of forms and its overlaps with other artistic disciplines. At the centre of the critique of dramatic theatre stood its use of however estranged mimetic representation, which was seen as discredited and was subsequently confronted with the notion of presence. In close exchange with their

counterparts in the emerging conceptual dance movement, theatre makers brought to the stage highly self-aware works, continually questioning themselves as products of ideologies, politics, times, fashions, and circumstances. Strongly inspired by de-constructivist and poststructuralist theory, they offered a new complexity of theatre signifiers revolting against the hegemony of the text, undermining the linearity and causality of drama, and experimenting with all possibilities of spectatorship and participation. Instead of representing a (fake) situation in order to critique it the aim was to create a (real) situation in the co-presence of the audience, focusing on the here and now of the experience, as German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann describes in *Post-dramatic Theatre* (1999):

> In contrast to other arts, which produce an object and/or are communicated through media, here the aesthetic act itself (the performing) as well as the act of reception (the theatre going) take place as a real doing in the here and now. […] The emission and reception of signs and signals take place simultaneously.

This focus on the medium and the form of theatre itself, the distrust in narrative content and psychological causality and the interest in creating individual experiences in which each audience member had to find her/his own path of interpretation, also had an impact on the concept of the political potential of theatre. The political effect of theatre was now primarily looked for in 'the how' of its representation, not in its concrete political contents. Philosophers like Jacques Rancière offered a broader theoretical base for rethinking the medium of theatre and the notion of performativity by analysing *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2000) and highlighting *The Emancipated Spectator* (2007).

It was an important moment of empowering spectators as co-authors of their own experience, but it had a significant side effect: the audience was seen less as a possible collective but rather as a gathering of individuals. Post-dramatic theatre and conceptual dance — once again resonating the changes in society — formed a spectator who, whilst emancipated from the forced-upon imagination of the director, has become akin to the ideal neoliberal subject that seeks its individualism in active consumption.

The consequent reaction of post-dramatic theatre and conceptual dance to the often simplistic or moralistic use of notions like truth, reality, or even politics with a complex game of layers, ambiguities and re-questioning enabled new perspectives and possibilities

that also reached far into the field of dramatic theatre. But building on the thoughts of philosophers who derived their theoretical concepts from their own political experiences and engagements (Michel Foucault fighting for human rights in prisons with the Groupe d'information sur les prisons, Alain Badiou being engaged in migration and asylum policies in the Organization politique, Jacques Rancière as a short term member in a Maoist group, to name but a few), the new generations of thinkers, artists, and curators too often forgot to bind their even further abstracted thinking back to their own contemporary, concrete realities. As a result we got too used to calling philosophical theories and performances 'political', even if they are only very distantly based on thoughts that themselves were already abstracted from the concrete political impulses that sparked them. A homeopathic, second-hand idea of political philosophy and art has become a main line of contemporary cultural discourse.

It is a thin division between the necessary awareness that everything is contingent and simple laziness. Complexity can become an excuse for intellectual and political relativism. The writings of Rancière in particular have been used as key arguments from very different sides — his scepticism towards any clear political statement in art and his valorising of the power of ambiguity and rupture as the true virtues of art, helped pave the way for wide definitions of the political. In the end, if everything is political, nothing is political anymore.

So where are we today? How can theatre still create spheres where alternatives can be collectively imagined, tried out, discussed, confronted? How can theatre create alternative models of how we might live together, or what kind of society or world we want? A look at the contemporary performing arts scene shows a strong desire for a theatre that not only focuses on pressing political issues, but also becomes a political space — a public sphere — in itself. There is no common organum to follow. We are in a period of trying out, of finding out — artists as well as the audiences. But there are enough bits and pieces (and sometimes even big chunks) of artistic work and political engagement that allow us to imagine the potential of engaged theatre again. A theatre that keeps the necessary self-reflexivity of the last decades but avoids the traps of pure self-referentiality. That understands contingency not as merely arbitrary and an excuse for relativism but as a call for active engagement to counter its consequences.

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When your trousers are literally glued to your theatre seat in a *Serata Futurista* (evenings organised by the Italian Futurists from 1910 on, mixing performance, painting, music, and often practical jokes), this kind of participation might not seem particularly desirable. But even though participation — in art and in politics — is not always pleasant, the belief that one can take part in shaping society is a necessity for democracy. On the other hand the putative participation that we are permanently confronted with in an all-inclusive capitalist system (that — unlike Marx's prediction — has so far always been able to absorb its internal contradictions by affirmation) has rendered the term almost useless: a pacifier which perversely delegates the responsibility for what is happening to citizens that cannot influence it, and thus enables the system to continue more or less undisturbed in its task to maintain itself. Rare elections, basic social care, some small measures against climate change and human rights violations here and there, and our conscience is satisfied. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek calls this procedure cultural capitalism.

So-called participatory theatre all too often merely mimics such placebo-involvement; offering not only fake, stipulated choices but also forcing the audience to engage in this transparent set-up. This is the real 'nightmare of participation' (to use a term by Markus Mießen): not being forced into participation but being forced into a fake participation. A permanent involvement (which basically means we are active only in the sense that we are consumers) that we can't escape and which merely prevents us from participating in the powers that be. Passivity disguised as activity. The audiences of the *Serata Futurista* understood that: for them the provocation that came from the stage — a participation forced upon them — was an invitation for a real fight. And many went for it.

A contemporary political theatre has to put itself right in the middle of this dilemma: not only avoiding false participation but at the same time reclaiming the idea of participation as such. A participation that thrives — in politics and art — on its radical potential. A participation that doesn't merely replace one mode of tutelage with another. Such an involvement does not necessarily have to happen with the consensus of the people involved. It can also aim at direct confrontation, and can experiment with miscommunication or even abuse.

Since, in short, participatory art is — taking the definition from Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (2012) — an art 'in which people constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theatre and performance', it can constitute a whole range of possible human relationships. Artist Pablo Helguera differentiates in *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (2011) between *nonvoluntary* (with no negotiation or agreement involved), *voluntary* (with a clear agreement or even contract) and *involuntary* participation — the negotiations in the latter being rather subtle, not direct, a play of hidden agendas in which 'deceit and seduction play a central role.' These categories of participation can shift and mix, of course. Maintaining a lack of clarity around them can be a useful artistic tool, as many of the early works of Christoph Schlingensief show. It was not only in *Bitte liebt* Österreich*!* that the status of the participants remained dubious, since it was never officially resolved whether they were real asylum seekers or actors and if they fully understood the game being played. A comparable ambivalence can be found in his work with handicapped actors, for which Schlingensief was regularly accused of abuse.

In a different way such ambiguities are also a key strategy of the Israeli company Public Movement. Interested in the rituals and choreographies of politics, they play a complex game with participation and representation, for example when trying to cast leftist activists as well as neo-Nazis and the German police for a re-enactment of the Berlin *First of May Riots* (2010). In the end all three groups withdrew and the project had to be realised in a different way. Similarly, their attempt in 2011 failed to convince a right-wing fraternity in the Austrian city of Graz to publicly perform one of their secrete celebrations. The line Public Movement walk might often be too thin, but the real political and artistic project is in many cases already happening during the preparation of such works, for example when extreme political adversaries meet and attempt in awkward conversations to find some common ground for direct confrontation.

Real participation implies giving up responsibility and power. Brecht's 'Lehrstücke' ('Teaching Plays') were to be performed by the audience itself, the working class. Brazilian theatre maker Augusto Boal not only followed this idea in his *Theatre of the Oppressed* but even handed over the responsibility for *how* the performance developed to the 'spect-actors' (spectators that during the performance turned into actors).

Dutch theatre director Lotte van den Berg's ongoing project (since 2014) *Building Conversation* aims at even further reducing theatre to its core. For her, theatre is first and foremost a place of communication, of meeting each other, a sphere where conflicts can be shown and experienced. An agreement to communicate by obeying often very different rules. And *Building Conversation* is indeed just this: talking with each other. Inspired by communication techniques from all over the world, models and frames for dialogues are developed. There are no actors, no audience. Just the invitation to participate in a conversation without words, inspired by Inuit assemblies, or alternating between reflection, retreat, and dialogue, following a method invented by Jesuits. Another conversation happens completely without a moderator, topic, or goal — a principle developed by quantum physicist David Bohm, exploring the patterns of our collective thinking. *Building Conversation* is directly influenced by Belgium political philosopher Chantal Mouffe and her concept of 'agonistic pluralism', and one of the talks is devoted to her theory.

A sphere of agonistic pluralism is also created by one of the most politically radical participatory art projects in the recent years. The *New World Summit* (2012 onwards), invented and organised by Dutch artist Jonas Staal, opens up alternative political spaces in the form of quasi-parliamentarian conventions of representatives of organisations that are excluded from the democratic discourse by being categorised as terrorists. These summits offer intense and touching moments where voices can be heard that are elsewhere silenced, and where a radical idea of democracy appears at the horizon. However they also produce moments of a strong sense of unease, disagreement, or even anger since these organisations are obviously not chosen by criteria of political correctness. Some might appear easier for the audience to identify with — for example the Kurdish women's movement — whereas others' causes might be seem unacceptable, for example when it comes to nationalism, violence, patriarchy, and hierarchies in many struggles for independence. The *New World Summit* welcomes very different organisations; there is no advice given on how to judge or relate to them. The only clarity comes in the critique of Western democracies which base their existence on undemocratic, secretive, and often — even by their own standards — illegal ways of excluding what doesn't fit in their own scheme. As Claire Bishop pointed out in her essay 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics' (2004): participation should create a sense of

'unease and discomfort rather than belonging.' Treating all involved as 'subject[s] of independent thought' is the 'essential prerequisite for political action.'

It is not by chance that Staal often chooses to hold the *New World Summit* in theatres — spaces in which all that happens is real and not real, is simultaneously concrete and abstract, and in which the difference between presence and representation is always at stake. Here things can be shown and said that don't find a form elsewhere, and where radical imagination is, in rare moments, still is possible.

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The question of participation is necessarily linked to the question of representation. Everyone participating in theatre — as an actor, performer, spect-actor or audience — is also automatically understood as representing a larger community distinguished by colour, sex, class, profession, and so on. Therefore, the questions that currently haunt all democracies — who is being represented in which way by whom and with what right? — are mirrored in theatre: Can a bourgeois actor represent a refugee? Can the west represent the global south? Can a man represent a woman? Is the representation of colonial clichés de-masking or just a repetition of a degrading insult? The problem addressed by recent discussions around 'black-face' and similar issues go much deeper than questioning the right and ability of a white actor to play a character of colour. These challenges are politically and artistically complex. They will certainly outlast short term debates about political correctness and occupy theatre for a long time as they resonate with fundamental arguments about the necessity, effectiveness, and rightfulness of representation within democracy in general.

Post-dramatic theatre in the 1990s and early 2000s sought solutions to this problem in different ways. Directors like René Pollesch and collectives like Gob Squad or She She Pop rejected the arrogance of talking about others by subjectively focusing on their own specific, small but influential social environment of a globalised, urban, white, creative, and semi-precarious new middle class. Others turned towards more documentary-oriented forms and opened the stage for the self-representation of 'experts of the everyday' as the director-trio of Rimini Protokoll famously calls their performers. Working almost exclusively with 'real people' — meaning non-actors —

Rimini Protokoll have over the years developed a very specific dramaturgy of care, suiting the demands of their performers as well as the artistic aims of the performance.

However, the rapid changes around the globe have also highlighted the limits of these approaches where the respect for 'the other' has often turned into either its fetishisation or into the self-centredness of believing one's own living room to be the world. Theatre makers like Monika Gintersdorfer and Knut Klaßen as a consequence search for new ways of handing over the stage to their African collaborators by permanently redefining the own role as directors. The concept of 'chefferie' not only gave the title to one of their works, but also serves as a metaphor of how to work together as it describes a political and administrative model of the meeting of many chiefs of equal status that was practised before the colonization of sub-Saharan Africa and continues to exist today in parallel with official government institutions.

By contrast, the Swiss Theater Hora — one of the best known companies of actors with cognitive disabilities — seems at first glance to still offer their directors rather classical authorial positions. However on second view it becomes clear that the resistance of the performers, their own strong and often unpredictable personalities, permanently undermine this working model. As guest director, the French choreographer Jérôme Bel made the ambivalence in *Disabled Theater* (2012) very clear. On one hand the strict orders he gave were announced during the performance on stage and highlighted the hierarchy of the production. On the other, the performers fulfilled their tasks in whichever way they wanted (and sometimes not at all). As Bel has pointed out, it is not the performers who are disabled but the audience who feel uneasy looking at them.

In the end it is in theatre as it is in society: only attempts at pluralism will work. Groups of people that have been largely unrepresented (or represented only by others) have to enter the stages of our theatres. And not only the stages but also the positions of theatre makers and audiences. If theatre really is a sphere in which social practices can be tried out or invented on a small scale, then this is one of the most urgent tasks at hand.

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As much as theatre can be a space of collective or collaborative imagination, it has also always been a medium for showing conflicts and

oppositions between ideas, powers, nations, generations, couples, or even within the psyche of a single character. Different forms of realism have sharpened this aspect of theatre by focusing on the internal contradictions of society. Brecht's dialectical theatre looked at the different aspects of concrete struggles to enable the audience to understand how it was created by the system they lived in instead of simply identifying with one position. Following Marx, Brecht's theatre was driven by the belief that when the class struggle would finally be won, a harmonious communist society would be created. Later philosophers like Jürgen Habermas and John Rowles tried — in very different ways — to save the ideal of a consensus society, believing that rationality would encourage humankind to overcome its individual interests. But we are not only rational beings; emotion will always play a role, as Chantal Mouffe stresses in *The Democratic Paradox* (2000): 'While we desire an end to conflict, if we want people to be free we must always allow for the possibility that conflict may appear and to provide an arena where differences can be confronted.'

Mouffe's concept of 'agonistic pluralism' therefore aims for democracy to be an arena in which we can act out our differences as adversaries without having to reconcile them. At a time in which the once frowned upon dictum 'Who is not with us, is against us' is having a renaissance at all sides of the political spectrum, we need playful (but serious) agonism where contradictions are not only kept alive, but above all can be freely articulated. Only through this can we prevent an antagonism that ends all negotiation. It is not by chance that Mouffe's concept draws its name from theatre, from 'agon', the game, the competition of arguments in Greek tragedy.

While some of the works of Swiss theatre director Milo Rau rely on very well crafted shock and awe realism, his staging of political trials appear to be textbook examples of an agonistic theatre. *The Moscow Trials* (2013) presented a theatre setup in which three traumatic legal cases against Russian artists and curators were brought again in front of a judge, but this time in the realm of art. Protagonists of the actual trials as well as people with close links to them were confronted with each other in an artificial but simultaneously highly realistic situation. Curators, artists, and critics were fighting for artistic freedom on one side, conservative TV moderators, orthodox activists, and priests on the other. For three days the Sakharov Centre in Moscow became an agonistic space, in which radically different opinions were exchanged in a way that was not possible

outside. In front of an audience that emotionally was just as involved in the piece as the performers, the independent jury in the end decided — by the smallest possible margin — that art was innocent.

As Mouffe suggests, public space is 'the battleground' for the agonistic struggle between opposing hegemonic projects. On a small scale theatre can create such spheres of open exchange, even in societies where free speech is scarce or in western democracies where the space between consensus and antagonism is becoming increasingly narrow. Art — using a differentiation by art theorist Miwon Kwon — not *in* but *as* public space might be one of the most important things theatre can offer. This public space is not limited to the physical and material space of the performance. As much as the trials initiated by Milo Rau were one-time events with a quite limited audience, they extended their stage far into the realm of news and other media, where discussions about politics as well as art continued.

While the once popular critical tool of mediated scandals — an essential feature of political art, especially in the second half of the twentieth century — seems to have become toothless due to its predictability, at moments it still manages to break the routine. Croatian director Oliver Frljić is one such protagonist of a neo-scandalist approach, and regularly creates heated debates in Croatia, Serbia, or Slovenia where he routinely pokes his finger in the wounds of post-Yugoslavian identity crises. This method does not work everywhere; in Germany for example Frljić's work is considered controversial but not overtly emotionally upsetting. Scandals develop their potential where the lines of demarcation within a society need to be made visible and/or where there is a necessity to find allies by concentrating one's own troops.

Manipulating mass media with the aim of disseminating a message as widely as possible is the domain of the US-American group Yes Men. Their strategy is first to make it into the news headlines with a false but disarming announcement, and then make the news again by uncovering the prank. Most famously, in 2004 they managed to appear on the BBC news by impersonating a Dow Chemical spokesman on the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal catastrophe. The false representative (performed by Yes Man Andy Bichlbaum) announced that his company would finally take full responsibility for the disaster and compensate their thousands of victims. The later disclosure of his real identity fuelled public debate about the scandal worldwide.

Also for the Berlin-based Zentrum für politische Schönheit (Centre for Political Beauty) the real battlefield is the newspaper headlines, as well as the TV news, Facebook and Twitter. In 2012 they offered a reward of 25,000 Euro for any information that would lead to a conviction of one of the owners of the weapon producer Krauss-Maffei Wegmann. Since the arms business itself was not amerceable the group searched for any other possible offence. The real denouncement however was a series of posters and a website with the names of the company owners in the manner of a wild west warrant. This artistically productive but ethically challenging ambivalence was pushed even further when Zentrum für politische Schönheit stole the memorial crosses for those who had died at the Berlin Wall in order to bring them — allegedly — to the outer borders of the EU, and thus creating a link to the victims of the borders of today. In their most recent and so far most controversial action, *Die Toten Kommen* (*The Dead Arrive*), Zentrum für politische Schönheit salvaged the corpse of a drowned 34-year-old Syrian refugee from a cold store at the EU border in Sicily and buried her in a Berlin graveyard.

The social turn in the arts brings to the fore the very questions that accompany all socially motivated initiatives: To what degree are the people involved self-determined? How long does a commitment have to last? Who is profiting most? Is it sustainable? It soon becomes clear that such questions don't always have the same answers when considered from the perspective of art, or from activism, or even from that of social work.

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It is not just theatre makers who are inspired by the numerous political movements in recent years and try to bring some of this momentum into their art but vice versa: performance, performative actions, and theatre have long been part of the creative repertoire of activism. Boal's forum and invisible theatre remained an inspiration for those bringing performances to the streets, and distantly inspired initiatives like the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army in London as a strategy to de-escalate confrontation with the police. As one of their founders, John Jordan, writes in *Truth is Concrete* (2014): 'Armed with mockery and love and using tactics of confusion rather than confrontation, some notable Clown Army actions were when a 70 strong gaggle of clowns walked straight through a line

of UK riot cops who, unusually, could not hold their line. When the video footage of the event was examined, it turned out that beneath their visors the cops were laughing too much to concentrate.' From agit prop to therapeutic theatre, performance as a 'useful art' has been playing an important role in political or social struggles.

Less explicit are the many theatrical moments of movements like Occupy, such as the famous 'human mike', which demands from everybody present the repetition of thoughts and arguments that one might not agree with before being able to react. Everybody is present in this act of individual and at the same time collective speaking. The assemblies themselves — the heart of the Occupy movement — are also performative in nature. Their political imagination is always also physical, and always performed, as philosopher Judith Butler described in her speech at Occupy Wall Street (2011):

> It matters that as bodies we arrive together in public, that we are assembling in public; we are coming together as bodies in alliance in the street and in the square. As bodies we suffer, we require shelter and food, and as bodies we require one another and desire one another. So this is a politics of the public body, the requirements of the body, its movement and voice. […] We sit and stand and move and speak, as we can, as the popular will, the one that electoral democracy has forgotten and abandoned. But we are here, and remain here, enacting the phrase, 'we the people.'

But despite all overlaps, the relation between art and activism remains a complex one. Just as artists reject the notion of giving up complexity and ambiguity, activists are likewise alienated by the traditional role of artists as especially gifted creators or even lone authors — and even more by the market or the institutions they are usually part of.

At the core of activism stands the concept of direct action: an action with the very concrete goal of pointing out a problem, showing an alternative or even a possible solution. The 'direct' points at the idea of a non-mediated action — in short, the time for talking and negotiating is over, or at least suspended. Direct action is the opposite of hesitation and ambivalence. Reflection — to a degree — is postponed. In this regard, direct action might feel like the moment in which activism is farthest apart from art.

On the other hand there is also a moment when a performance gains momentum and there is a point of no return. Where it is all

about the here and now. In this regard, direct action might feel like the moment when art is closest to activism. Many radical moments of live art might very well be considered direct actions.

In any case, direct actions are usually not spontaneous; they are often meticulously prepared, mapped out and staged. They are planned like a military action, or like a piece of performance art. The Russian activists of Pussy Riot, to take a famous example, did not just march into the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour and spontaneously decide what to do. They chose the setting carefully, rehearsed text and movements.

The inflatables invented by the collective Tools for Action serve as a means to resolve tense and potentially violent moments or, in case this fails, as shields against water cannons. At the same time, they are eye-catching for the media covering the demonstration. But most of all, they tend to create performative, often theatrical situations: at a demonstration in Spain a giant inflatable cube was tossed towards the police, and at first the highly armed squad of 20 riot cops backed away, then tossed it back. The cube moved back and forth a couple of times before the police finally managed to get rid of the thing.

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Eliminating the difference between presentation and representation might have been, as art theorist Boris Groys claims, the goal of much radical art of the twentieth century and still be a dream of some activist and artists. But politically-engaged theatre offers the more complex and necessary possibility that whilst eradicating difference it also analyses it at the same time. It does not create an artificial outside of pure criticality and neither does it have to lure in apolitical identification. Theatre is the space where things are real and not real at the same time. Where we can observe ourselves from the outside whilst also being part of the performance. It is a paradox that creates situations and practices that are symbolic and actual at the same time.

After all, as Žižek pointed out in his speech at Occupy Wall Street: today it is actually easier to imagine the end of the world (as done in so many Hollywood blockbusters) than the end of capitalism. At a time and in a system where we have even lost, as Žižek suggests, ‘the language to articulate our nonfreedom’, radical imagination reminds us that there is still the possibility to act at all.

CAROL MARTIN

HISTORY AND POLITICS ON STAGE

THE THEATRE OF THE REAL

'...What happens is of little significance compared with the stories we tell ourselves about what happens. Events matter little, only stories of events affect us.'

Rabih Alameddine, The Hakawati

The question — what is political theatre today? — assumes that political theatre extends beyond staging the stories of underrepresented communities, performing a social good such as work with the ageing, the incarcerated, the disabled, or arguing for social justice. Political theatre today is deeply engaged with the representation and analysis of real events in ways we have never quite seen before. Constructed from interview-based verbatim and archive-derived documentary sources (letters, diaries, interviews, records, photographs, films, YouTube, and Facebook) the real is often presented in the context of uncertainty about actually knowing anything in a highly manipulated digital world. Today, theatre's political contribution is to both represent events for further examination and explore the shifts in paradigm, perspective, and subject matter that digital reality has wrought. The overlap and interplay between 'theatre' and 'reality', the blurred boundary between the simulated and the 'real' world, is one of the most compelling and productive areas of theatrical activity to emerge in the twentieth century and continue in the twenty-first.

Theatre of the real has many names: documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre-of-fact, theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, investigative theatre, nonfiction theatre, restored village performances, war and battle re-enactments, and autobiographical and biographical theatre. The array of terms indicates a range of methods and outcomes that may overlap and cross-fertilise. Any combination of theatre created from the verbatim use of transcripts, trials, and interviews, re-enacting the experiences of witnesses, historic events, and places, biographical and autobiographical accounts might be employed. In all of these methods, there is the desire to produce what Roland Barthes calls the 'reality effect', an effect that confers the status of legitimacy upon the artwork because what is represented is thought to have really happened or