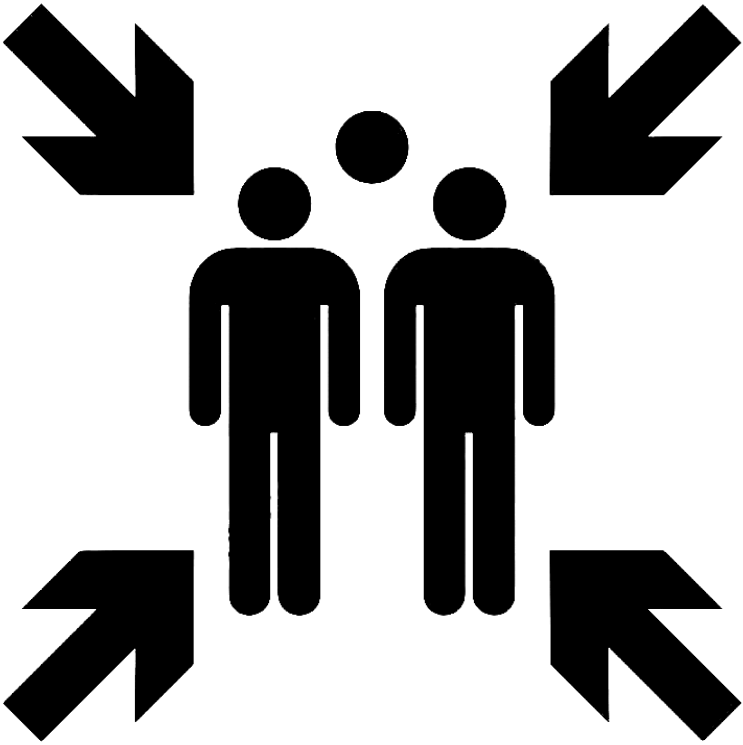
THE ART OF ASSEMBLY

Florian Malzacher

Political Theatre Today



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The Art of Assembly surveys theatre today to demonstrate its political potential in both form and content. Drawing on numerous examples from around the world in performance, visual art, and activist art, curator and author Florian Malzacher examines works that draw on the particular possibilities of theatre to navigate the space between representation and participation, at once playfully and with sincerity. In a time of wide-ranging crisis, *The Art of Assembly* is a plea for a strong definition of the political and for a theatre that is not content merely to reflect the world's ills, but instead acts to change them.

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Florian Malzacher is a curator, author, and dramaturg as well as the host of *The Art of Assembly*, a series of talks and conversations about the potential of gathering in art, activism, and politics. From 2006–2012 he was festival programmer of the interdisciplinary festival steirischer herbst in Graz; from 2013–2017 the artistic director of the Impulse Theater Festival. He is the editor of numerous publications on theatre, on the relationship between art, activism, and politics, and on performance curation. These include (co)edited books on the work of theatre companies Forced Entertainment, Rimini Protokoll, and Nature Theater of Oklahoma, as well as *Truth is Concrete: A Handbook for Artistic Strategies in Real Politics* (2014), *Not Just a Mirror: Looking for the Political Theatre of Today* (2015) and *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy* (2017). His books and essays have been translated into fifteen languages.

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Political Theatre Today

Translated from the German
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"Art is not a mirror that reflects reality,
but a hammer with which it can be shaped."
(Marx, Brecht, or Mayakovsky)[1]

Christoph Schlingensief: *Please Love Austria!* (Montage)

PROLOGUE

Some protesters, red-faced, scream at one another. Others try to convince the numerous onlookers in strident tones: their country is being overrun by strangers; their culture, their families, their identity all are in grave danger. An old man, eyes brimming with tears, waves a tabloid featuring his fears—front page, capital letters. A handful of Korean tourists observe the strange spectacle, confused: "Little Austria" against the rest of the world.

More than twenty years have passed since the late German film- and theatremaker Christoph Schlingensief dropped his shipping containers housing *Please Love Austria!* (2000) in the center of Vienna, right next to the famous opera house. The conservative Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel had just concluded his devil's pact with right-wing demagogue Jörg Haider and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). Other EU countries were discussing sanctions against the fellow member state, and Austria itself was discussing the borders defining the country, the borders defining democracy, and the borders defining art. The world was watching.

It was against this backdrop that Schlingensief staged his long since legendary production under the striking banner "Foreigners out!"—a reality show with real asylum seekers. For six days, the containers were home to a group of immigrants who could be observed around the clock (via an online platform connected to surveillance cameras) as they went about their lives, while the Austrian population was invited to vote them out of the country one after the other.

The scandal was enormous. Conservatives felt defamed by the parody of their own arguments; leftists were angered by what was, in their view, a cynical display of human suffering coupled with willful ignorance of years of activist work on the ground, which the spectacle made more difficult. It was the year of the first German-language installment of the reality television show *Big Brother*, which some riled-up feuilleton commentators heralded as nothing less than the beginning of the end of the humanist age.

That was a long time ago. The same television show is still running, but although it was once controversial, now it seems a little old-fashioned compared to all the other reality programs which are at least as cynical. In Austria, the FPÖ, despite numerous (at times grotesque) scandals, remained a prominent fixture and for a while even managed to instate party members as Ministers of the Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Defense—and even as Vice Chancellor. This is no exceptional case. Far-right parties are part of parliamentary everyday life all over the world, and it is not only in Hungary and Poland that constitutional states are being transformed into "illiberal democracies." *Please Love Austria!* stayed playful in spite of serious opposition and even impassioned aggression. Schlingensief succeeded in walking a very thin line that stumped almost every attempt to pin down his intentions—unlikely that all this would still be possible today. Political and social, but also artistic conflicts have ossified and taken on sharper edges; the world has become so confusing that it does not seem to need art to create space for ambiguity. The storming of the Capitol in Washington, D. C. in 2021 is just one recent example of the many images of political escalation that have long since eclipsed even Schlingensief's imagination. Supposedly clear lines of conflict around identity, nationalism, racism, colonialism, climate catastrophes, social tensions, and other issues have split open, becoming deep, apparently insurmountable rifts.

The world has become so confusing that it does not seem to need art to create space for ambiguity.

In some respects, the West, along with large parts of the East, still suffers from the aftereffects of TINA ("There is no alternative"), the much-quoted doctrine with which the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher legitimized her devastating social cutbacks at the beginning of the 1980s: an early star of that neoliberalism which, despite altered rhetoric, has lost little of its power to this day and has long since deeply inscribed itself in economic, social, and political structures.

In 1989, the Berlin Wall dividing Europe fell: the Socialist system in the East collapsed parallel to the abandoning of the welfare state in the West. At the end of the 1990s, the "Third Way" of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder brought social democracy onto the more market-oriented course of the "new center" which was becoming an effective doctrine in many other countries. "No alternative" became a central concept, and with it, much open political competition fell by the wayside. As early as 1992, political scientist Francis Fukuyama provided a kind of historical-philosophical legitimation of TINA in his book *The End of History*: after the collapse of the Eastern bloc and with it, of communist ideology, for him the liberal market economy and parliamentary democracy were the unstoppable victors.[2] No need to argue anymore …

But history was not over after all, and we still feel the side effects of TINA and the like today. They have prepared the social ground for a state of affairs in which the absence of alternatives is regarded as common sense and, as theorists from Chantal Mouffe to Slavoj Žižek remark, political values have been replaced by moral ones.

The fact that in recent years, political and social positions have become increasingly radical and opposing opinions more and more irreconcilable is, like the accompanying triumphal marches of right-wing and far-right parties, not a contradiction to our TINA-society but rather its direct consequence. The denial or demonization of possible political alternatives as a kind of political consensus

blackmail is one of the reasons for the radicalization of opinions, especially at the right end of the spectrum. So now there are two sides, both of which can see no alternatives to their own solutions.

Ironically, the heralding of the "end of history" is the perfidious variant of a social model for which many leftist or liberal philosophers—from Karl Marx to Jürgen Habermas or John Rawls—have wished: a model of unification based on the premise that rational considerations will one day lead people to overcome their own individual interests and agree on the right thing.

But we are not particularly reasonable beings. Feelings and selfish considerations too will always play a role. Nor is there for some conflicts, as Chantal Mouffe emphasizes, simply *one* rational solution. There will never be a world without power structures and particular interests: "[W]hile 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. The democratic process should supply that arena."[3]

Mouffe's concept of *agonistic pluralism* therefore describes democracy as a battlefield in which we must have the opportunity to act out our differences as opponents without resolving them. This demand is not easy to digest, because it not only contradicts any hope for democracy as a comprehensive safe space, it also goes far beyond the argument that competition enlivens business: "Adversaries do fight—even fiercely but according to a shared set of rules, and their positions, despite being ultimately irreconcilable, are accepted as legitimate perspectives."[4] The readiness for such acceptance is the only way we can prevent an *ant*agonism from coming to pass, one that puts an end to all negotiation and understanding and whose final consequence is (real or at least symbolic) civil war: a situation that seems to have been almost achieved in many countries such as the USA or Brazil. "We could say that the task of democracy is to transform antagonism into agonism."[5] For

Christoph Schlingensief: *Please Love Austria!*

democracy must always be reestablished and negotiated; it lives on accepted conflict and partisanship.

Which opinions do we allow, and to which do we want to deny space? Which conflicts can the theatre portray, and about which ones should it remain silent? In a time when, on the one hand, George W. Bush's dictum "If you're not with us, you're against us"—radicalized by Donald Trump—is experiencing an astonishing renaissance on all sides of the political spectrum, and on the other hand, the logic of consensus is still trying to put many democratic discussions to bed, theatre can be a space in which a playful (but serious) agonism not only keeps contradictions alive, but above all allows them to be articulated freely. After all, it is no coincidence that Mouffe's concept takes its name from ancient sport and culture tournaments. *Agon* is also the name of the contest between opposing arguments in Greek tragedy.

Theatre can be a space in which a playful (but serious) agonism not only keeps contradictions alive, but above all allows them to be articulated freely.

Western theatre always was above all a medium for the representation of conflicts and opposites: between good and evil, between ideas and ideologies, societies and nations, powers and the powerful, ideals and traditions, between generations, families, and couples, or even within the psyche of an individual person. The conflicts that are carried out are representative, sometimes physical, sometimes psychological, sometimes discursive. Theatre is a place of negotiation, a space of (albeit often partisan) agonistic pluralism, however often last acts may suggest a reassuring conclusion.

Alarming as the current social, ecological, and political situation is, for the theatre it also offers an opportunity to spark new social imagination, either in collaboration or in friction with the numerous movements around the world. How can other forms of coexistence be thought, tried out, discussed, and confronted together

in the theatre? How can theatre participate in thinking about the society and the world we actually want? How can theatre, without resorting to cheap preaching and didacticism, dare to attempt—together with its audience—confident answers? What forms, both aesthetic and ethical, are needed in order to be truly political and not just to perform a political attitude?

A look at the current international theatre scene shows that there is a strong desire among artists and audiences for a theatre that not only addresses pressing political issues, but itself becomes a public space in which aesthetics and ethics are not contradictory. A theatre that is—how deceptively simple this seems—political both in its content and in its form.

This book is an attempt to understand how theatre today can be a concrete place where the world around us—political events, social visions, major struggles, and pragmatic attempts at solutions—is not only shown, but consciously shaped. And to understand where, in this work, artistic and political dangers might lurk.

This foray through political theatre does not claim to be complete. On the contrary, it is largely based on my own direct encounters and experiences as an audience member, and not infrequently on my participation in projects as a curator, dramaturg, or co-initiator. Therefore, there are points of particular emphasis, digressions, and blind spots. Although artists from many parts of the world play an essential role in this book, there is a focus on the German-speaking world. And on so-called postdramatic theatre, which is in turn internationally entangled in many ways and continuously interacts with artistic works and discourses from a wide variety of regions.

Thus, this book does not even attempt a comprehensive presentation of everything that could currently be understood as political theatre. Much that fills the feuilletons is not discussed here. It is a partisan book. At the same time, it is a searching book, written about a searching theatre within a searching society. Where it

offers answers, they are provisional, just as theatre itself is always provisional. What works and is important today will be outdated tomorrow, at best a precursor for the next step, at worst a dead end. But at the same time, that's exactly what political theatre is all about: countering an often supposedly well-founded relativism with serious, consistent assertions, and at the same time knowing that these are always only working theses. All examples in this book can only be understood in the context of their time, and of the geographical setting in which they emerge.

Sometimes a year or one hundred kilometers' distance can change the whole picture.

Part of the necessary background is that this book was written before the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. It appeared in its original German-language edition right at the beginning of the first lockdown, at a time when almost no performance could be shown anywhere. It is not yet possible to foresee the long-term consequences this will have for theatre.

In the paradoxical machine of theatre everything is simultaneously actual and fictional, real and symbolic. You can play along, be right in the middle of it, and at the same time observe yourself from the outside.

The playwright Heiner Müller once called for all theatres in the world to be closed for a year so that we could see what we really need them for.[6] Now, venues and festivals were shut down in actuality around the globe again and again for months and months. But instead of fundamentally rethinking their own medium and its routines, theatre artists engaged in constant activity. Streamings and discussions, readings, lectures, Zoom performances … . Theatres were closed almost worldwide and yet there was more theatre available every day than anyone could possibly watch. The horror vacui was too strong. It prevented almost any silence; it prevented us from taking almost any time to reevaluate our art and our lives.

As if we were afraid that the moment we stopped, everything would fall apart forever.

But this never-ending talking and doing contained a hidden answer to Heiner Müller. While the phantom pain grew, it became more and more clear that all the screening and Zooming was not even close to the real thing. It was a permanent reference to something absent. To something that used to be there and hopefully would be there again soon. It only existed in this relationship.

In this spirit the works described in this book are *Gesellschaftsspiele* (parlor games) that can only be played collectively. The double meaning of the German term (literally translating to "society games"), which is also the title of the original edition, brings a larger social dimension into view.

The rules of these games can often only be understood through playing them; sometimes they are not easy to figure out. But as much as you may get caught up in the game, it is always about keeping an eye on what is at stake. On what basis is the game played? Who made the rules and to what extent do they determine what is played and who can play?

These games take place in the paradoxical machine of theatre, where everything is simultaneously actual and fictional, real and symbolic. You can play along, be right in the middle of it, and at the same time observe yourself from the outside. Theatre is always a social, but also a self-reflexive practice. Political theatre makes use of exactly that.

Anta Helena Recke: *Mittelreich*

REPRESENTATION

A family sits at a table. An average family that has made something of itself. That has something to lose and not much to gain. It is a story of war, rape, loneliness, fear, but also quite mundanely one of average prosperity and the fear of loss of status, of fathers who are dominant yet cowardly, of silence and avoiding responsibility. A story that could take place anywhere. And that is, at the same time, deeply rooted in German collective consciousness; a postwar narrative hearkening back to when psychological repression became a national virtue. Harsh, yet steeped in melancholy framed by Brahms' *German Requiem*, the banal nestles up to the transcendental: "For all flesh is as grass / And all the glory of man / as the flower of the grass. / The grass withers / And its flower falls away."[7] But something is off in this picture staged in a barren, somehow at once massive and claustrophobic hall. The family around the table is Black: an image average Germans recognize from American TV series, but not Bavarian family sagas.

In a country in which Black people in theatre appear almost exclusively as *explicitly* Black people (which is why Black actors end up playing not only the same types, but also often exactly the same roles, over and over), director Anta Helena Recke has bootlegged the already existing production *Mittelreich* (2015)[8] by Anna-Sophie Mahler on the main stage of the Münchner Kammerspiele. One to one—the same stage design, the same text, the same movements, the same sequence of events—only the actors, the choir, the musicians have been replaced by Black protagonists. It is an imitation in

the tradition of US-American appropriation artists such as Elaine Sturtevant and Sherrie Levine, who since the 1970s have played a refined, often feminist or institutionally critical game with the male-dominated art world by repainting, reproducing, re-enacting, or otherwise appropriating well-known images.

But this *Mittelreich* copy (2017) is more than just a fairly exact appropriation of another director's staging. Through the appropriation of white figures (and their embodiment via white performers) by Black actors, it not only points out that Black bodies and stories are underrepresented on German stages if they appear at all. The work at the same time addresses a completely different, and ambivalent, appropriation: the dream, or the nightmare, of complete assimilation. A Black family that seems to have suppressed all nonwhite cultural influences, for example when the son wrestles with the fact that he does not know "what the German Wehrmacht soldier in Russia and France, who was my father, did." (The director herself writes that in this moment, she can't help but think of her Senegalese grandfather, "who distributed candy to German children as a French soldier after the war in Berlin."[9])

Along with the very clear demand for more visibility of people of color in artworks and in society, it is the profound ambiguity of this work that challenges the audience. The staging is not limited to the stage. Like any good work of appropriation art, it continuously refers to its contexts. To the white spectators, for example, who find themselves in a situation in which there is no clear right or wrong. One's own interpretation must be continually reinterpreted: Isn't personal worldly openness in fact paternalistic benevolence? Do we assess family power structures differently depending on whether we are watching a white or a Black family? What shifts when we realize that the refugees spoken about on stage—displaced Germans from the East after the Second World War—were just as unwelcome as refugees from Syria almost seventy years later? ("They are simply completely different people, these refugees. They just don't fit in

here."[10]) And isn't it true that we (the white audience) can't help associating these thoughts with the actors on stage—even though they, like the director, were all born in Germany? And if, on the other hand, we believe ourselves to be truly "color blind" (or to have become "color blind" in the wake of the performance), are we not simply and self-reassuringly ignoring a difference that we, at least structurally, are maintaining ourselves? The partly fumbling, sometimes awkward—often "overly polite"[11] (Recke)—tone of the post show talkbacks says a lot about how difficult it still is for the German society to speak about discrimination at least in the public sphere.

But even if the dilemma of the white spectators is an essential part of the staging, the evening is at least as much directed at the people of color in the unusually mixed audience, because it offers possibilities for identification that are otherwise almost always absent in German municipal theatres.

Mittelreich is also one of surprisingly few examples of institutional critique in theatre. (This too being a genre of the visual arts, in which the criticism of an art institution becomes the actual artistic practice, usually commissioned by the very institution being criticized.) It was not only the producing theatre itself that was thrown into question by the fact that the cast had to be completely made up of guest actors because the ensemble had no Black members. *Mittelreich* is above all a clear critique of a concept of a repertoire as such that, as Recke says, almost always imagines a white audience—and at the same time considers this audience to be universal.[12] There are not many theatres that make the public investigation of their own actions part of their program.

Beyond this, the wider European theatre scene, the selection criteria for acting schools, ensembles, and repertoires, and not least the field of professional criticism with its quality categories are under scrutiny. While most of the reviews appreciated *Mittelreich*'s approach (and the work was invited to the Berlin The-

atertreffen by a jury of critics), there were also absurd derailments. Under the headline "Black alone is not enough," the reviewer for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, one of the most important German daily papers, expressed her disappointment that the Black cast did not infuse the stale original production with a "reviving blood supply" as she had hoped (and explained coquettishly that—aren't we still allowed to say that?—this was of course "politically incorrect, because it was driven by, albeit positive, prejudices"). But maybe the actors simply weren't Black enough—because "they're not that Black, these six new bodies and faces." The actual discrimination would therefore not lie in the theatre system, but in this "altogether bad amateur theatre."[13]

Anta Helena Recke's copy of *Mittelreich* shows to what degree all those implicated in theatre—whether actors, performers, spectators, or critics—are always perceived as representatives of a larger community, distinguished by skin color, gender, physicality, social class, profession … . Thus, the questions that are currently dogging all democracies (who is represented in what way, by whom and with what right?) are reflected in the theatre. Can a bourgeois actress represent a refugee? Can the West represent the Global South? Can a man represent a woman? Is the representation of stereotypes and clichés (ethnic, gender, sexuality, etc.) an act of exposure or simply the repetition of degrading insults?

The questions that are currently dogging all democracies (who is represented in what way, by whom and with what right?) are reflected in the theatre.

Recent discussions around blackface, the use of terms perceived as defamatory, and the like, call into question far more than just the right and the ability of white actors to portray characters of color. These are politically and artistically complex challenges that—like postcolonial discourse as a whole—have arrived late to continental European theatres.

The strategy of appropriation, which Recke negotiates with *Mittelreich*, has another complex aspect. When pop singer Miley Cyrus, who has a sharp instinct for using scandal as a marketing tool, twerked at the Video Music Awards a few years ago, a fierce and polemic discussion ensued. Was this a white woman stealing a piece of African American cultural identity for the purposes of her next hit? Was her appropriation of the move, marked by rhythmic and sexually explicit thrusting and shaking of the buttocks, an homage or a caricature? (Similar discussions accompanied Madonna's song "Vogue" more than 20 years earlier.) This, too, is a question of power relations: appropriation from "below" of what's "above" is self-empowerment, integration, assimilation, expansion of identity, or loss of identity. Appropriation in the opposite direction, robbery? A desire to understand? Recognition?

In their performance *Situation with Doppelgänger* (2015), theatremakers Julian Warner and Oliver Zahn trace the appropriation and marketing of Black and other minority dance forms in pop back to the time of minstrel shows of the nineteenth century, in which non-Black performers in makeup portrayed stereotypes—sometimes romanticized, sometimes hateful—of Black people. Later, Black dancers and musicians themselves were hired to perform in these shows, a feedback loop of clichés.

The questions raised by such cultural appropriations have not changed since: who owns such dances, who is allowed to dance them? When is imitation a subversive tactic, when does it reinforce existing power structures? In *Situation with Doppelgängers*, Warner and Zahn—one Black, the other white, but neither a trained dancer—synchronously interpret very differently connoted minstrel, pop, and folk dances, in which not only white performers imitate Black people, but Black dancers too, in a form of self-empowerment, imitate their white colonial "masters." Skating on thin ice, the two investigate—analytically and playfully at the same time—models of authenticity, identity, and sovereignty of interpretation.

The fact that such constructions have to be constantly renegotiated unmistakably shapes the performances created by the German-Ivorian group Gintersdorfer/Klaßen, not only thematically and aesthetically, but above all, in the way the group collaborates. If "the dancers sing, the comedians dance, the singers speak," then for Gintersdorfer/Klaßen this is a conscious speculation

> … on unknown skills … by which we avoid the pitfalls of representation in order to enter the realm of direct communication. The latter unfolds on every level and incorporates the audience, who are invited to mentally engage and maybe comment verbally. There's no such concept here, of unwelcome unforeseen disruption, we pursue a discursive dramaturgy without a regulated and timed progression. Untimed does not mean badly timed or long winded, it rather means timed by how things relate to the moment.[14]

The title of their performance *Black Thoughts Now – Chefferie* (2013) refers to a political-administrative model of the gathering of many equal leaders, which dates to precolonial times and is still practiced in sub-Saharan Africa parallel to official state structures. Thus "chefferie" is also a metaphor for German director Monika Gintersdorfer's own collaboration with powerful performers from the Ivory Coast, Germany, and, in this case, Rwanda and Congo. Although Gintersdorfer herself never appears onstage during the performance, contradictions and discursive or personal differences from the rehearsal process remain visible to the audience. Controversial interpretations and representations of African self-understanding are played off against each other with wit and irreverence, and every Western attempt to homogenize the image of the continent is undermined with humor. The performers do not avoid verbal or physical confrontation, nor do they shy away from politically sensitive stereotypes of national identities: the unease of the predominantly white audience is exactly what they want.

Julian Warner & Oliver Zahn: *Situation with Doppelgängers*

In *Chefferie* and many other Gintersdorfer/Klaßen pieces, the actor Hauke Heumann represents the white Westerners in the audience on stage, but at the same time quickly translates the text of the other performers back and forth between French, German, and English, allowing himself his own very personal commentary—a futile, but always hopeful and extremely funny struggle with a role that sits between self-denial and self-assertion.

Crises of Representation

In the Middle Ages, the matter was still relatively clear. The king has two bodies: a natural, human, mortal one, and a symbolic, collective-religious one that lasts forever.[15] The King is dead, long live the King! Later, in absolutism, there was only one body, the monarch was identical with the state—"L'état c'est moi" ("I am the state")—and no longer needed a deity for his legitimation. It became more complicated when the revolutions in North America and France suddenly granted sovereignty to the people. If power is distributed among everybody, no one person can embody it: the locus of power must remain empty.[16] Not only do political rulers no longer have any power of their own, the proxy power that they exercise over time belongs to an increasingly heterogeneous people. An impossible task: to represent something that cannot be represented. Thus, democracy is never complete; it always remains "to come," as philosopher Jacques Derrida puts it.[17]

It is inevitable, therefore, that modernity is threaded through with crises of representation—in politics, but also in art. First, painting and sculpture no longer wanted to be reduced to the task of mere illustration; then Marcel Duchamp brought the everyday into the museum with the ready-made, objects which at first seemed to represent nothing but themselves. Since the 1960s, performance art and Happenings have tried to escape representation

by focusing entirely on presence, on the nowness of the situation that they themselves created. And institutional critique focused on the structural, organizational, and economic conditions of representation.

In the theatre, too, the fight against traditional notions of representation raged, with Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht as the most prominent protagonists on opposing sides. While the former fought to eliminate the difference between representation and the represented and to fuse art and life into one, the latter wanted to transform them, make them transparent, and at the same time include those who were not sufficiently represented both artistically *and* politically. It becomes clear that Brecht's concept of *Gestus* (that is, a kind of referential pointing) is not only an aesthetic one: just as in democracy power is no longer embodied but becomes a gesture that refers to what is actually sovereign,[18] so it should always be clear that the actor's representation of a character is purely symbolic. *Gestus* is a finger that points to the impossibility of representation as well as the impossibility of non-representation, in both democracy and in the theatre. The two meanings of the word representation—that of portrayal and that of delegation—cannot be separated.

Regietheater and Early Postdramatic Theatre

It is the progressive theatre of the 1970s and 1980s that many in Europe and the USA consider to be almost synonymous with political art in general. And indeed at that time theatre was an undeniably relevant factor in many social debates (albeit in very different ways in West and East). At a time when opposing ideologies were still powerful and the separation between the blocs clearly marked, the theatre engaged in a multitude of political concerns by representing the misery of the world—from the Vietnam War to apartheid

in South Africa to the everyday adversities of a local working-class family. While in the East the subversive force often lay in hidden or coded messages, in the West open provocations and spectators loudly leaving the auditorium in protest were an important part of the repertoire. Whether using newly written dramatic texts or ever-modernized classics: radical interpretations were an essential feature of a *Regietheater* (director's theatre) that, despite its many new approaches, on the whole remained trapped in mimesis no matter how abstract it might have been. Even if the political theatre of the time often succeeded in generating an awareness of the systemic reasons undergirding the abuses it depicted, it was largely unable to escape the dilemma that its representations were merely symbolic repetitions of precisely those evils which it actually wanted to combat. Brecht had already given this phenomenon a name in the early 1930s, referring to it as "cannibal drama": "The physical exploitation of the poor was followed by psychological exploitation. Double ministerial salaries were thrown at those mimes who could imitate the torments of the exploited as faithfully as possible… ."[19] The object of pity generates feelings of grief, affliction, guilt, or even anger among the spectators, who in all likelihood—at least structurally—are implicated in keeping this very system of exploitation alive.

The two meanings of the word representation—that of portrayal and that of delegation—cannot be separated.

Ultimately, the theatre often simply continues what Brecht analyzed in his *Short Organum for the Theatre*: "The theatre as we know it shows the structure of society (represented on the stage) as incapable of being influenced by society (in the auditorium)."[20] Not only the play on stage, but the entire theatrical setup, not to mention the hierarchies in the institution itself, all reproduce the system they aim to criticize. In the words of theatremaker René Pollesch:

> [Actresses must] reproduce on stage the sexism that reigns in society …, legitimized by the dramatic canon, which knows no female characters, where in *Robbers* Amalie briefly pops up, wearing even in today's productions a skimpy dress to provide for a bit of eroticism, and then goes out again, and has nothing to say … .[21]

In clear opposition to this representational practice, primarily from the 1990s onwards, a theatre began to emerge which did not just want to reform dominant models but revolutionize them outside the established structures. Postdramatic theatre, devised theatre, live art, performance theatre, independent theatre—there are many labels for this genre, which is usually not easy to define due to the variety of its forms and its overlaps with other artistic disciplines. Even more than skepticism about the dominant role of the text, to which productions in dramatic theatre are almost always subordinated, criticism of the use of mimetic representation was at the core of these new aesthetics and working methods. Author-directors like John Jesurun and René Pollesch and collectives like Gob Squad and She She Pop refused as presumptuous to talk about others, their problems, guilt, and suffering. Instead, they turned their gaze to themselves, to their pop-cultural environment and the theatre as a medium. In this they aligned with what Douglas Coupland writes in his then much-quoted novel *Generation X*: "Either our lives become stories, or there's just no way to get through them."[22]

Not only the play on stage, but the entire theatrical setup, not to mention the hierarchies in the institution itself, all merely reproduce the system they aim to criticize.

They made the place of theatre visible as meeting point, but also as machinery, while—unapologetically subjective—negotiating on stage their own small environment: a globalized, urban, creative, semiprecarious middle class, which was still in the making and therefore had to continuously define itself. However, the very po-

Gintersdorfer/Klaßen: *Chefferie*

litical impulse to let reflection begin at home carries the danger of confusing one's own living room with the world, as British-German group Gob Squad self-critically summed it up years later in *Western Society* (2013). Here, too, as usual, the life of the artists' own bubble is brought to the stage, but the title provides the framework for an ironic-nostalgic look thrown at a white Western society that has long ceased to exist—that perhaps never existed. As if seen through the wrong end of a telescope, that which is very close suddenly appears very far away.

Since the 2000s, a number of theatremakers have taken a different approach to dealing with dramatic theatre's representational trap, increasingly turning to documentary formats and opening the stage for the self-portrayal of "real people." Directors' collectives such as Rimini Protokoll, the Manchester-based company Quarantine, or the Argentinian author and director Lola Arias have developed in their work with "experts of the everyday" (Rimini Protokoll) very specific and very different dramaturgies of care which often succeed in meeting both the needs of the performers and the artistic demands of the performance. It is essential for the worldwide success of such a "documentary theatre" that it neither limits itself to the ultimately finite reserve of existing or newly created dramatic figures, nor to a theatre of peers on which most other independent theatremakers exclusively lean. That it introduces people one rarely, or never, sees in this way. That it does not show them—like on reality TV and talk shows—in real or artificial states of emergency, but in ones where they radiate calm and self-confidence. And that it makes no secret of the fact that in this staged authenticity, the performers also just play a role, albeit the role of their lives.

Such games of (self-)representation have been further intensified by groups like Switzerland's Theater HORA which is—alongside groups such as the Australian Back to Back Theatre, the French en-