NATIONAL IDENTITY: PENDING. CASE-STUDY GERMAN COLLECTIVES

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Abstract: This paper aims to examine multiple creative strategies through which German performing arts collectives deal with the issues of national identity, as explored by generation gaps and politics, all of these ardent topics for the contemporary European Union member. Our intention is to emphasize the importance of these topics for the German artistic scene and to point to a number of relevant initiatives (Rimini Protokoll, She She Pop, Gob Squad).As devised creation processes, an eclectic approach in creating the performance text and a permanent questioning of the relationship between performance and audience emerge as quintessential for these groups, we must also refer to the political behind their productions. Our premise is that with replacing "one" with "many" and using interviews and "real-life" documentation in their work, they are attempting to touch upon what Jacques Rancière calls "emancipation": one version of events is no longer possible, and these artists see it as their duty to challenge their audiences and to allow them to choose a personal, yet informed version of the facts. Permanently engaging in redefining and recovering historical, political, economical and social issues, these groups challenge the boundaries between theatre, performance art and installation art and provide an innovative exploration of theatrical mechanisms and a new artistic paradigm, deeply interested by the political and the appropriate language to discuss it on stage.

Keywords: performing arts; postdramatic; (re)negociation; politics; spectatorship.

As it has in the film industry, with the explosion of Post-Wall (road) movies exploring the theme of otherness and the clash / reconciliation between German identity and its position in the larger European or global frame (such as films by Wim Wenders of Fatih Akin, to name the internationally renowned filmmakers), the theme of national identity still feeds contemporary German theatre productions and offers the background for innovating theatrical language. Rimini Protokoll's and She She Pop's documentary-interactive theatre and Gob Squad's virtual-interactive theatre all deal with the contemporary Weltanschauung, on one hand, and interrogate audience mechanisms as part of this identity quest process.

Stemming from a necessity to engage everyday realities, these performance groups translate their interest for identity and self defining into a reflection about the "mise-en-scène", the global apparatus that governs theatre audiences emerging in a performance. It is no longer a question of what is shown / represented on stage, but also of how it engages the audiences. The theatrical experience becomes not so much esthetic, as experiential, in the sense formulated by Hans-Thies Lehmann: "The task of the spectators is no longer the neutral reconstruction, the re-creation and patient retracing of the fixed image but rather the mobilization of their own ability to react and experience in order to realize their participation in the process that is offered to them."[1]

We will briefly look at concrete examples from the creation of the named performing arts groups in order to identify how they reframe identity and how they stimulate audience emancipation.

Citizens on stage

Rimini Protokoll's social theatre aims to discuss national issues without taking sides, but on the contrary allowing for a critical self-positioning of each audience members. Their recent project *100%* works with 100 real citizens of a city, chosen as to best describe the

[1] Hans-Thies Lehmann, Postdramatic Theatre, Routledge, 2006, p. 134-135

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statistics behind its demographics. The performance consists in a series of scenes dealing with specificities of the social categories on stage: popular / local music is played; affirmations that may or may not correctly describe the beliefs of a certain category are discussed or made visible, through splitting the stage in 2 parts, one corresponding to "yes" and the other to "no" and by having the cast move to the correct spot after the utterance of each affirmation; audience interventions are solicited and welcome in certain improvisational scenes spread throughout the show.

Their *Prometheus in Athens* performance, a one-time event performed in 2010, while the economic crisis in Greece was the main topic of the day, uses as cast 103 people, chosen to reflect the complexity of the Greek capital. Three of them were illegal immigrants, pointing to the massive load of illegal work performed in Athens. After introducing themselves, stating their job title and their age, each of the performers named the character of the Greek tragedy they identified with. By mirroring the audience and by stating from the beginning the current trend of the mental state in contemporary Athens, *Prometheus in Athens* creates subtle connections between the role of the community in the ancient Greek tragedy and the contemporary Greek downturn. Although no comment on the correspondence between tragedy and contemporary reality is made directly, through a performative device, the performance produces mixed feelings inside the audience, as it chooses to represent statistically a diverse community and to confront the statistics with the "real people". Only in this mise-en-scène both performers and audience, the statistics and the reality are juxtaposed.

Writing a performance review after seeing *100% San Diego*, Rimini Protokoll's project created for and with San Diego citizens, theatre critic Heather Ramey concludes: "The performers do reveal themselves in a provocative way on stage, but the experience of watching it wavers between an experiment on lab rats and a revelation of the human side of statistics. This is "reality theatre."[2] Rimini Protokoll explore national identities internationally, adapting their projects to the specific community they are addressing, and reveal how provocative taking a stance or another is. Their theatre, coined "invisible" among other terms, shows no preoccupation for the traditional "directing", no intention whatsoever to guide the audience understanding towards a unique perspective on events: "Rather than reproducing on stage their own version of these situations, they prefer simply to exhibit them in a multiperspectival stage composition."[3]

Karl Marx: Capital, Volume 1 and *Breaking News* are two other Rimini Protokoll projects that use a similar raw material (non-professional performers) in a slightly different manner: performers are specialists in a certain field, or personalities relevant for a certain issue. *Karl Marx: Capital, Volume 1* consists in a series of biographical narrations of the specialists, inevitably dealing with tangential issues to capitalism, the relationship with Soviet Russia, German reunification, while *Breaking News* features an on-stage news editor, news channel footage being edited live on stage and translated by live interpreters, as well as fragments from Aeschylus' *The Persians.*

Bringing together various information sources and using narration as opposed to dramatism, Rimini Protokoll refutes the conflicting nature of theatricality and reaffirms the importance of multiperspectivism: "The collective is more interested in shifting the attention onto the very nature of a document as a fragment of reality in order to reveal the inadequacy of reductive binary oppositions such as the fictional versus the pragmatic, imagination versus empirical truth, information versus affective value."[4] Realities, potentialities all

[2] Heather Ramey, Rimini Protokoll's Reality Theatre, Theatre Forum, Issue 44, p. 64
[3] Katia Arfara, Aspects of a New Dramaturgy of the Spectator, Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts, 14:3, 2009, p. 112
[4] Idem, p. 113

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become equal and even equivalent, as the emphasis is placed upon the ongoing renegotiation of terms, notions and topics. At the end of the day, it is an ongoing doubt that reigns: "The last phrase of the performance, Marx's maxim in life, points towards the mode of expectation, conceptualization of the future, and analysis of changing circumstances: 'Everything is doubtful'."[5]

Generational analysis

She She Pop is a Berlin-based feminine collective whose work revolves around generational transfer, history and self-defining. Their performance *She She Pop & Their Fathers: Testament. Belated Preparations for a New Generation based on Lear* further explores William Shakespeare's topic of mutual parent-offspring emotional and material investment, adapting it to contemporary and biographical contexts, as the real fathers of She She Pop members are included in the cast. Mixing live music and singing, video projections, monologues and non-verbal scenes, *Testament* completely refutes a dramatic structure and/or narration, and focuses instead on balancing the multiple perspectives, the different age perspectives, as two generations confront each other, as well as individual perspectives, replacing linear dramaturgy of theatrical conventions with the desire to be as genuine as possible through multiperspectivism.

Although no correspondences are being made with actual social issues, the performance being a universal, yet subjective, personal, autobiographical artistic product, the political underscores the sheer exploration of the intergenerational gap. As the fathers (representing history, the older generation) make comments on the work of their daughters (future, experiment, creativity), one of them even asserting he feels embarrassed and ashamed by his daughter's performance, contradictions and politics become the highlight of this apparently merely touching, emotional family portrait: "if life imitates art, even a karaoke version of Something Stupid can be archly political."[6]

Subtly crafted, *Testament* makes visible many interconnected layers and perspectives on one topic, and by doing so reaches out to audiences of all ages.

In *Schubladen* (*Drawers*) the exploration of national identity is perhaps most obvious: the production uses autobiographical documents of the performers and is structured around an East Germany – West Germany dichotomy: She She Pop members, raised in the West, are confronted by East-born performers, whose subjective input will compete with and complement the input of the Westerners. The minimal set consists of three tables with two chairs each, constructing a three-folded spoken, verbal clash mixing autobiographies / personal histories and official documents.

A performative device similar to that of Rimini Protokoll is used when one of the performers asks the others direct questions concerning their (political) thinking they answer by raising their hand (yes) or by turning with their back to the audience (no). If describing their political thinking as liberal or neoliberal is an easy task, labeling it as Easterner or Westerner thinking is impossible for the performers. In the end, what does it mean to be and think like an Easterner or a Westerner? The question is still valid for the young German generation, hence the need to interrogate their political identity in relation to otherness: "She She Pop and their Eastern colleagues search for the objective in the private. They avow polyphony, collective narration. Gaps, incommensurabilities, imprecisions, and missing links are a part of their system. Who were we? Who are we? Why have we become who we are?"[7]

[5] Björn Frers, Work in Progress: Rimini Protokoll's *Karl Marx: Capital, First Volume* and the Experience of the Future on Stage. Theatre Research International, 34, 2009, p. 158
[6] Peter Crawley, She she pop & their fathers: Testament, Irish Times, 08 Oct 2011
[7] http://www.sheshepop.de/en/productions/schubladen.html

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She She Pop are commited to creating a piece that "moves between improvisation and adaptation, free and restricted play, between the process of self-making and being defined by others."[8]

Blindfolded re-iconization

Gob Squad is a British-German collective whose work *Kitchen (You've Never Had It So Good)* is a reconstruction of Andy Warhol's pop art films, interestingly without the collective having actually seen his works before starting rehearsals. The result is an interactive performance, where the audience is literally invited inside the set when entering the performance space (past the video screen, into the acting spaces which will only be visible on screen during the performance) and is relied on to contribute to the performance dramaturgy. *Kitchen* was described as "a disturbing meditation on the elusiveness of identity and the unrecoverability of time."[9] despite its seemingly improvisational character.

Scenes from cult Andy Warhol films are being recreated behind the projection screen and are only visible for the audience on this screen. Audience participation is however a major component of Gob Squad pieces, and audience members are recruited by performers and asked to perform simple tasks behind the projection screen (such as sleeping, in a reconstruction of Warhol's *Sleep*, singing or dancing), while instructions are being provided by Gob Squad performers through headsets.

The audience experience is central to the aesthetic experience, as *Kitchen* is built around performer-audience interactions and plays with audience willingness to take on cult identities: "No audience substitutions happen until everyone has had a chance to acclimate to the show, and the cast only selects those they think can stand the "aggression" of the camera."[10] However, performers and audience-performers are equally ignorant / innocent about the subject of their reenactment, and it is *via negativa* that Gob Squad approaches the 60's pop art canon. Audience response is occasionally highly emotional, and audience participation denotes enthusiasm and engagement in a participatory experience. In the case of *Gob Squad's Kitchen*, the core of the performance is not the dramaturgical content, but the frame in which professionals and audience-performers are called on to work together. Since the artistic team and supposedly most of the audience members have no profound knowledge of Andy Warhol's cult films, the *Kitchen* experience clearly privileges process over product and is not so much an reenactment as an uncut reenactment making-of.

Conclusions

The common denominator of these theatrical experiences is the emphasis placed upon the audience, who is ultimately given the measure of its own subjectivity. Hans-Thies Lehmann's observation "Art privileges – even in the 'creation collective' – the individual *par excellence*, the singular"[11] matches the theatrical experiences we looked at. Spectatorship is no comfortable status for Rimini Protokoll, She She Pop or Gob Squad, as it implies emancipation from a passive position, and, paradoxically perhaps, one is not lost in the collective, but is required to show engagement in the artistic work and engagement in a redefinition of his Weltanschauung, in terms of personal identity, national identity and relationship with the canon, be it cultural, historical economical or social.

[8] Annemarie Matzke, Enter the Game: The role of the spectator in the performances of She She Pop, Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts, 16:3, 2011, p. 120

[9] Jeffrey Gantz, Gob Squad gives Warhol's `Kitchen' a makeover, Boston Globe, Jan 14, 2012, p. B.12

[10] Helen Shaw, Eating the audience: Gob Squad's Kitchen (You've Never Had It So Good), Theatre Forum, Issue 39, p. 28

[11] Hans-Thies Lehmann, Postdramatic Theatre, Routledge, 2006, p. 178

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It is also relevant that the theatrical forms discussed in this article are developed by artistic collectives: a plurality of perspectives is perhaps derived from the joint effort to best understand and describe a subject through accumulation and a certain "looseness", as anti-theatrical as it may appear in comparison to the "dramatic" theatrical production.

Performer presence on stage is another key for understanding how theatrical conventions are renegotiated in the frame of postdramatic and political theatre. For She She Pop "The task of staging ourselves has become more and more important for us. But we are not concerned with authentic self-presentation. We try to show ourselves as another. Or to say it in the words of the performance artist Spalding Gray: 'Look at me; I'm the one who sees himself seeing himself'."[12], while for Lehmann "The actor of postdramatic theatre is often no longer the actor of a role but a performer offering his/her presence on stage for contemplation."[13] Embodying a character is no longer a viable, efficient artistic paradigm, whereas being is in itself political, as it erases the dogmatic relationship between the passive audience receiving knowledge and the active artist giving an objective / correct / inalienable information.

To conclude, the German scene postulates that form is (also) content, and fully explores the potentialities of the post-dramatic, interactivity, participatory and documentary theatre, being far from having exhausted the theatrical vocabulary used to interrogate contemporary issues. Although trying to find similarities between a collective's theatre work and strategy and another would oversimplify their approach, there is a strong red line crossing their productions, a line that reads engagement with contemporary realities, identity and political relationships, including the performer-audience relationship, a central issue of contemporary theatre. Icons are being dismantled and identities deconstructed, and one's identity is more than ever defined by the ability to reframe, recalibrate and rethink.

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[12] Annemarie Matzke, Enter the Game: The role of the spectator in the performances of She She Pop, Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts, 16:3, 2011, p. 117

[13] Hans-Thies Lehmann, Postdramatic Theatre, Routledge, 2006, p. 135

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