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Performance — Art — Academy**

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Johannes Paul Raether**

4 Ich in Anführungszeichen

4 I in Quotation Marks

I. In a discussion following a symposium presentation, the audience's questions and the artist's answers revolved around her decision to present herself in her performances as emotionally involved, while at the same time designating her being-involved as citation.

A.F. — What are you surprised about? That I mix?
WOMAN FROM THE AUDIENCE — Yes—yes, that you bring yourself in, in fact.

A.F. — In fact, I would be happy to bring myself in more.

In two fragments of performances Andrea Fraser had described her work and frequently seemed to be fighting back the tears. Neither in the performance nor in the conversational situation that followed did she abandon her position of oscillating between acting and confession. In neither case could the audience determine which of her gestures and proposi-

tions were credible as personal statements and which were conceived for the performance. The various ambivalent reactions she provoked in the audience, whether of empathy, embarrassment or disapproval seemed equally calculated. The scene cited here gave rise to yet more of the effect that makes her performances so ambiguous. One audience member expresses her surprise at the way the artist Andrea Fraser brings herself into the performance and acts out emotions on stage. Fraser claims that this is not actually happening to the extent that she would like. She stages a distance to herself, a detaching of herself from herself, while at the same time insisting that she is present in person.

In the same discussion, Andrea Fraser speaks of the tension in her performance between the two poles represented as *I* and *not-I*, pointing not only to her speech but also to her nakedness on stage in other performances as a quotation, while insisting on the undeceivability of one's own present body:

»I used to joke that I'm not really nude because I'm in quotation marks. But it's not the body of any of the people I might be quoting standing there, it's my body standing there.«

This is probably an old trick actors use, claiming that it's not their own nakedness on stage, but that of the role they are playing. In Fraser's performances the supposed protective function of the quote loses its effect when shame, anger and resistance towards being exposed is invoked and reproduced simultaneously. In her confessional form of speaking, with which she seems to react to the situation of being the object of the gaze, the artist reflects, so to speak, the actual presence of the audience. The indifference kindled in the spectators, the insecurity about how

to read and assess the display of emotionality, probably lies in their being awkwardly touched by the exposure that they are made to witness publicly. At the same time they are able to withdraw from this voyeuristic position into the aesthetic experience of her outstanding acting at any time. The exposure is acted and performed, and draws attention to the discomfort on both sides. Fraser's work on and with institutionalized forms of exchange within the art world (exchange not only of money and goods, but also of recognition, community, information, power, affect) is also aimed at the conventions of public performances as well as the position of her audience, the visitors at exhibitions, talks, or openings. The shift from performance to conversation that takes place in the situation described here turns the conversation into a locus of performance, without simply making it theatrical. It thus becomes a moment in which the gap between audience and performer is continually reset, precisely as it is transgressed, and yet remains negotiable.

II. What a difficult communion between the people on stage and those in the auditorium, locked in an apparently static divide, with passivity on one side and activity on the other, for the duration of the performance. Or: what a generous arrangement, attention for one side and a show for the other. There is an agreement here to endure the situation of being separated from one another, or to enjoy it, as long as it lasts (unless, of course, one leaves the room); to allow oneself to be forced into spectatorship on the one hand, and be ignored at the same time; or as performer, to expose oneself to the viewer's critical gaze. Performing on stage, one might not be able to forget the audience, one might even address it, and

yet there is a logic to performance. As an observer, one can sit far away or right up close, one can even become a part of whatever it is one is watching, and yet one always remains a member of the audience. What is specific about the performance format – and in particular the type in which artists themselves perform – is that it puts individuals who have different relationships to what is being performed in the same space, and the act of reception becomes one with the duration of the show. The possibility of dialogue springs to mind. I would call this the wrong track of performance. The difference between performer and audience perhaps lies in what one could term the object-like quality of the performer: the person on stage does not only speak but also points to themselves at the same time, as well as to the place and the audience. It is these two poles that create a particular tension: the realisation that someone is standing before us as a person, and is talking to us, and yet at the same time they remain the object of the performance and are thus barred from being addressable.

So it cannot be taken for granted that discussions will immediately follow a performance, however obvious the connection might seem between lecture and conversation, live performance and lesson, entertainment and education. The conversation with Andrea Fraser caught my attention while reading *WORK THE ROOM, A HANDBOOK OF PERFORMATIVE STRATEGIES*. The book contains texts, images, and interviews from and with artists who participated at the *PUBLIC AFFAIRS* symposium on performance and political action at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna; both were initiated and organized by Ulrike Müller. There is also a contribution by *Discoteca Flaming Star*, the group that together with Johannes Paul Raether, organized *ZEIG*

HER FÜHR VOR TAUSCH EIN (2011 in Berlin and 2012 in Stuttgart). The two events, each spanning several days, were designed to reflect on the overlapping of performance, conversation, education, and event. I was in the audience in both cities, and in *GENERAL PUBLIC* in Berlin when Ulrike Müller was invited to do a performance.

III. The performance was a lecture, which was not initially addressed to the audience, at least not to the people gathered in the room. In *DEM BILD WAS ERKLÄREN: ULRIKE MÜLLER ÜBER FRANZ ERHARD WALTHERS 1. WERKSATZ* (1963 – 1969) (*EXPLAINING THINGS TO A PAINTING: ULRIKE MÜLLER ON FRANZ ERHARD WALTHER'S FIRST WORK SET, 1963 – 69*) the performer's attention was directed primarily towards her own paintings, which were installed on a wall: five small-format enamelled metal plates whose geometric compositions resembled abstracted parts of bodies. The audience was also facing the paintings on the wall and thus, too, the Powerpoint projection suspended above them. The spatial configuration meant that paintings were unable to see the images of Franz Erhard Walther's *1. WERKSATZ* that were projected above them; instead they had exclusive eye contact with the artist, who, facing them – in other words, standing behind the audience – spoke to them. Although there was no actual stage situation in the small exhibition space, it did not feel as if one were sitting outside but rather in the midst of a lecture situation, meaning that the auditorium, visually speaking, was empty. Spatially and conceptually this gave rise to a sort of parenthesis: while the audience was literally sitting in the way of the artist as she gave a talk to her paintings, which effectively made the audience redundant, at the same time it was involved in a performative game.

The audience was not really released from the conventional relationship, but was deployed in its *function* as audience. It was confronted not only with the idea of the image as addressee, but also with the talk itself, which gained in meaning and complexity over the duration of the performance. Yet precisely because during the performance one soon found oneself back in the familiar mode of following Ulrike Müller's quasi art-historical research and observations, the conceptual framing did shift the way the performance was read. In the conversation that ensued once the seating situation had relaxed again, everyone present discussed the situation and their own position within it much more vigorously than they did Walther's practice. This had less to do with narcissism than with the experience of having taken part in the performance in the very role of passive spectator.

Yet it was not easy to determine whether the absurdity of the situation lay in the earnestness of the lecture or in the fictional subjectification of the paintings. Because however humorous the performance was, the lecture also provided the art-historical background to Ulrike Müller's own play with image and viewer, participation and being ignored, performance and theoretical reflection. In it she outlined Franz Erhard Walther's working process as well as his fascination with the concept of the empty centre of the image, which he translated literally in drawings and described as »open for imaginary images of the viewer«. In the sculptures of the 1. WERKSATZ he then gave exhibition visitors the opportunity to physically enter the centre of the works, devising long swathes of fabric, for example, which people could unfold and stretch out between them. Ulrike Müller invoked this idea, and reapplied it by placing the audience at

the centre of her performance, assigning it a listening role above all – the activity, in other words, which it is ordinarily assigned.

»How to leave behind the space of representation and move into the here and now of production and reception?«

was another question which, during her lecture, she put to Walther's concept and thus indirectly to her own practice. The answer obviously did not lie in asking the audience to adopt unusual body positions or to get involved in writing the script. Rather, in her *positioning* of the audience Ulrike Müller highlights the distance that opens up between performer and audience, and exchange and communication as processes that react to this distance without necessarily negating it.

A poster in the exhibition space made the reference to teaching situations yet more apparent. It featured a photograph of an old-fashioned school desk, on the table a pile of paper, a book, an apple and a pencil, on the chair another enamel painting. A silent painting on the school chair is hardly a metaphor for successful dialogue or audience activation, even if the painting cannot simply be described as passive, and if it remains unclear as to what it is *doing*, who might do something with it, or what it is prompting us to do. This symbolic *bringing to life* of the image is not the same as the promise of direct exchange within a conversation or a shared action – the wrong track of performance. Instead the *painting as pupil* is much more likely to stand for dispensing with the dualism of passive/active when, as in this case, it invokes a series of positions: at once work and viewer, the body and its abstraction, learning, judging, distanced and playful, on the periphery and at the centre of

attention.

IV. A simple analogy between theatre and school would not only downplay the differences in the institutional frameworks, it would also overlook the fact that the role of dialogue in the classroom is far more self-evident than it is in performance. When in *THE EMANCIPATED SPECTATOR* Jacques Rancière compares specific aspects from both worlds, he does so not without alluding to their differences. The interesting thing about Rancière's study in this context is his attempt to reassess the distance between performer and spectator by proceeding from the performance as a common reference, which is not negotiated from the same perspective but with equal competencies. The performance, he says, is the third term to which both sides can refer from their respective standpoints, »but which prevents any kind of equal or undistorted transmission.« Rancière opposes the idea of the theatre as a place of communion and the equation of seeing with passivity that leads to the »tricky dramaturgy of guilt and redemption«. By this he means theatre's culpability in the passivity of the viewer, that is compensated for with their participation, for example, in the social mandate for action in the Brechtian learning-play, or the implication of the audience in the collective energy of an Artaud performance. In both cases he recognizes the tendency to ignore the specifics of the theatrical medium, the mediated nature of the performance, that is, by drawing the viewer onto the side of the actors – within the logic of the performance and contingent upon the performer having the upper hand in terms of knowledge.

Staying with the motif of separation/distance Rancière establishes the link to situations in education where the aim is also to present, communicate, and transfer

knowledge. He writes: »In the pedagogical process the role of the schoolmaster is posited as the act of suppressing the distance between his knowledge and ignorance. Unfortunately, in order to reduce the gap, he has to reinstate it ceaselessly.« He counters this view, positing that the mere *capacity* for acquiring knowledge creates an equality between teacher and student, or rather an ignorance on the part of the teacher with regard to the student's emancipation. This implies that it is not the gap between knowledge and ignorance that creates the distance, so much as an understanding that the act of acquiring knowledge as well as that of reception evades such terms as controllability and unambiguousness, and can only be a shared experience to a limited extent. According to Rancière, neither the classroom nor the theatre is about transferring the correct knowledge, rather it is about »the poetic work of translation« as a condition of all apprenticeship, in other words »a matter of linking what one knows with what one does not know.«

To highlight the gap between performer and audience both physically and discursively, to redefine it, or experiment with it is the material and the experience of the third term to which both sides refer. The participation of the audience or the getting-personal of the performer as way out of representation seems in the examples cited here, however, to function more as a quotation than a serious suggestion. The promise here is neither of participation nor immediacy, but of play with the (unfulfilled) desire for them. Because ultimately it is still about presence, it is about being in the same space at the same time, about aesthetic experience, and what it means to be involved: involved in the working process and emotional conditions; whether as someone who pays for admission, stands

naked on stage or clothed in front of it, and whether they are marked in quotation marks as *audience* or *performer*. Both Andrea Fraser and Ulrike Müller understand art institutions as spaces in which the social and economic conditions under which people learn, work, and conduct discussions are subject to negotiation – through acting, lectures, painting, or spatial configurations, and through the distance between performer and audience that these means produce as a *third term*.

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