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# Reclaim Challenge

## Rethinking the Critical Impact of an Education of Performance Art in Denmark

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### ABSTRACT

As the Danish National School of Performing Arts merged nine schools into one institution, the momentum for establishing a national, state-funded education in performance art was missed and the continuation of “traditional” profiles within performing arts education was kept. As such, the future of performance art can be seen as a kind of “supplementary technique” to otherwise acting- and text-based theatre in Denmark.

This article argues, through examinations of three basic aspects of performance art, for the necessity of profiling performance art as a separate, own genre in a Danish educational context. The article does not engage in a mapping of the field of performing arts educations in Denmark or of the different approaches to an educational programme in performance art. Rather, it addresses some of the basic critical figures and approaches in performance art that would challenge the scope of conventional theatre education – and could potentially be a game-changer within Danish performing arts.

Firstly, the performance artist as a *figure* questioning representation is traced through historical figures of the avant-garde. Secondly, the *sociality* of performance art is read as confronting and challenging the work ethos of a neoliberal context, where creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship have become imperatives. And finally, the production of performance art is read as a mode of producing knowledge, which challenges the instrumentalization of art as well as a standardization of academic methods.

In conclusion, after the presentation of the three perspectives on performance art, the organization, scope, and potential impact of a Danish education in performance art is presented in a coda.

### KEYWORDS

Performance art education, Bologna Standards, performance artist, performance collectives, research-based performance, embodied criticality, Irit Rogoff, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Das Beckwerk, Madame Nielsen, Jack Smith, Isabell Lorey, Bojana Kunst, Sara Ahmed, Monster Truck, DANSEatelier, cobratheater.cobra, Breakfast Club, ongoing project.

## Reclaim Challenge Rethinking the Critical Impact of an Education of Performance Art in Denmark

As the Danish National School of Performing Arts merged nine schools into one institution, the momentum for establishing a national, state-funded BA-education in performance art was missed and the continuation of “traditional” profiles within the performing arts was kept. Despite recommendations from the organization of Independent Performing Artists (Uafhængige Scenekunstnere) to make a BA in performance art, the future of performance art can now be seen as a kind of “supplementary technique” to otherwise acting- and text-based theatre in Denmark.<sup>1</sup>

The need for an educational programme in performance art has been covered in several reports, including Independent Performing Artists’ report *Reflections on Education in Performing Arts in Denmark* (Danish: *Overvejelser – om scenekunstudannelser i Danmark*), which provides a thorough mapping of existing educations in the Danish environment with a few exemplary references to other European schools. The main argument in this report is the need for an education in performance art. However, the report, *Roads of Progress – Performing Arts in Denmark* (Danish: *Veje til udvikling – Scenekunst i Danmark*) from 2010, which was published by the Ministry of Culture, already suggested that a different type of education than the established theatre schools would produce a more diverse landscape of artists. The Cultural Ministry’s own report on education in the performing arts from 2013, *Exposition on Higher Education in the Field of Performing Arts* (Danish: *Udredning om de videregående uddannelser på scenekunstmrådet*), explicitly recommends the establishment of an MA, diploma, or con-

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that two of the authors of this article have participated in the discussions of Independent Performing Artists on this topic.

tinuing education's programme in performance art.<sup>2</sup> Finally, researchers from the two university programmes in Theater and Performance Studies (University of Copenhagen) and Dramaturgy (Aarhus University) in 2015 published an extensive volume on the different visions for a performance art education in Denmark based on interviews with different actors and stake holders in the landscape of education within the performing arts: directors, teachers, and administrators from different schools and educations, state-funded as well as private educations, independent artists, and scholars in the field.

The intention of the present article is not to contribute further to this mapping of the field of possible different approaches to performance art education. Rather, we wish to address some of the basic critical strategies and characteristics of performance art that would potentially challenge the scope of conventional theatre education. It is necessary to understand the institutional position of performance art if we are to fully grasp the possible effects of an educational programme in performance art upon the Danish environment, i.e. how it could potentially be a game-changer within Danish performing arts.

Thus, in the following, we wish to strengthen, through the examination of three aspects of performance art, an argument for the necessity of profiling performance art as a separate, own genre in a Danish educational context. We argue that an education in performance art would be a much needed *challenge* and *expansion* of the tradition of text and actor-driven theatre in Denmark, it would offer a contemporary practice of critique and collectivity through art, and – due to its roots in art as a practice of critique and criticality – produce new forms of knowledge in the encounter between academic and artistic research. In that way, a national education in performance art could stir up the traditional Danish theatre institutions as well as offer a critical artistic practice able to confront challenges of the contemporary neoliberal art market.

We move through three aspects of performance art, which are important for the change within education: firstly, the performance artist as a *figure* questioning representation is traced through historical figures of the avant-garde. Secondly, the *sociality* of performance art is read as confronting and challenging the work ethos of a neoliberal context, where creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship have become imperative. And finally, the production of performance art is read as a critical mode of producing knowledge, which challenges the instrumentalization of art as well as the standardization of academic methods.

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<sup>2</sup> We are aware that the Danish National School of Performing Arts is currently rethinking its new MA programme along interdisciplinary lines, however this programme is not yet public, and the fact remains that the entry into performing arts education on a BA level takes place within traditional disciplines.

Methodologically we employ traditions of Performance Studies: we draw on the historicity of performance art throughout the avant-gardes until today and we search for ways in which art addresses social, political, and epistemological challenges.

## TRAVELLING FIGURES: THE ARTIST IN PERFORMANCE ART AND EDUCATION

### The impact of education

If performance is basically “an essentially contested concept” as Marvin Carlson famously argued some twenty years ago, it is important that an education in performance art should offer students the possibility to find their own way through this open field of interdisciplinary explorations between theory and practice, between academic and artistic critique, reflection and experiments.<sup>3</sup>

Internationally, we can see that quite a lot of influential stage artists have actually graduated from university programmes rather than from academies and art schools. We are thinking here especially of the German programmes in Gießen, Hildesheim, and Bochum, who all have strong academic profiles while also teaching artistic practice. Of course we also see academies and art schools with a strong theoretical dimension, for example at the Norwegian Østfold Theatre Academy in Fredrikstad or the Art Academy in Copenhagen. What is crucial, however, is to offer an educational environment that actually makes specific individual combinations and profiles possible.

In her article “Expanding the Canon” on performance practices within theatre studies, Professor Meike Wagner discusses the three German university-based performance educations in Giessen, Hildesheim and Bochum. She concludes with some remarks on their impact on the structures and practices of the theatre and its institutions, not least on the division of labour in the theatre. Wagner says about the candidates from these institutions:

*They have initiated a re-thinking of the traditional division of labour between actors, performers, directors and dramaturges at theatres by a more interdisciplinary approach: actors now become directors, become performers, become dramaturges, become visual artists... These ‘half-educated all-round performers with a touch of theory’ have entered the institutionalized and subsidized theatres in Germany only to question the traditional production processes. In return, acting academies and conservatories are forced to re-model their idea of the actor towards a creative and conceptually working actor/performer and interdisciplinary and collective creation.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Carlson 1996, 1. Carlson quotes a 1990 article: Mary Strine, Beverly Long, and Mary Hopkins “Research in Interpretation and Performance Studies: Trends, Issues, Priorities”, in G.M. Phillips, & J.T. Wood, (eds), *Speech communication: Essays to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Speech Communication Association*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 181–204.

<sup>4</sup> Wagner 2016, 13.

What Wagner registers here is the impact of a changing educational programme on the whole sector and on the ways in which work tasks are organized and distributed among the artists involved. But she also acknowledges the fact that performance in its broadest and most interdisciplinary sense constitutes a research area within the performing arts where new forms and practices emerge along with critical thinking as artistic practice.

From an insistence on physical and visual expression in the tradition from Antonin Artaud, performance as a broad, independent field of live art has become a theoretically informed field, as we see for example in the broad field of artistic research, and in new formats like the lecture performance, the scenic essay, and others. In fact, performance seems simply to be the name given to artistic experiments that are widening the field of what theatre and art might be. What we are discussing in Denmark is actually how to provide the performing arts with an education that would change and challenge it. At the same time, there is no consistent infrastructure of venues for producing nor watching performance art in Denmark compared to for example Norway's triangle of Avantgarden, Teatergarasjen, and Black Box Oslo. What we discuss here is therefore also the ways in which an education seems to be necessary for the artistic foundation of such venues in Denmark.

### **The performance artist as an emblematic figure of indeterminacy**

The insistent challenge of genres and disciplines seems to place performance art in an avant-garde tradition. When the early avant-garde artists wanted to fuse art and life and challenge the boundaries of art, they turned to performance and went on stage. In Dada or Futurist cabarets, for example, artists directly confronted their audience, putting themselves at risk in their bodily presence, and crossed the boundaries between the different art forms in an interdisciplinary theatricalization of the arts.<sup>5</sup>

However, for the individual artist this nomadic practice of transgression, de-territorialization, and border crossing has often come at a high price. Historically, the performative self-investment of performance artists in a practice transgressing the borders between art and life has involved a risk of actually falling out of society due to a mixture of precarious life conditions and indeterminate subject constitution.

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<sup>5</sup> It was, of course, art historian Michael Fried who in his essay "Art and Objecthood" from 1967 claimed that, "what lies between the arts is theatre." Fried was discussing the 1960s minimalist art, but the statement is symptomatic for a much longer conflict between the avant-gardes' performative crossover practices and high modernism's insistence on the purity of the single art forms.

In recent years, a Dada artist like Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874-1927) has been rediscovered as a kind of early body artist.<sup>6</sup> During the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, she toured the streets of New York, Berlin, and Paris, as well as the artistic avant-garde communities of these cities, with her strange poses and costumes made of junk. In fact, Baroness Elsa was the one Dada artist to actually take seriously the claim to unite art and life – and she terrified the male artists while doing it when she posed in public space with her shaved head and her trash costumes – or pursued the men with her explicit sexual energy.

Even though artists like Duchamp, Man Ray, and William Carlos Williams themselves experimented with a certain kind of cool gender performance, most obviously in the figure of Rrose Sélavy developed by Duchamp and Man Ray, they nevertheless described the Baroness as filthy and sexually aggressive. As such, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven has been identified as an abject, precarious body, transgressing not only the limits of good taste, but even the norms that define whether you may be recognized as a subject in society or not. She died impoverished of gas suffocation in her flat in Paris in 1927.

In her ground-breaking book, *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada*, art historian Amelia Jones uses the figure of Baroness Elsa to turn the history of New York Dada upside-down. Jones argues that the lived art of the Baroness, rather than the object-based work of the male Dadaists, displays the Dadaist programme of irrational transgression of modernity's destructive technocratic rationalism. However, Baroness Elsa's performative queering of gender codes and her costumes made from the debris of capitalist industrialism were so radical that they even placed her outside of the norms of the avant-garde.

Ultimately, one may ask why the price paid for this radical fusion of art and life was ultimately death and expulsion from society as an abject *other*. Historically, artists have always been exposed to financial insecurity. But performance artists react in a specific way to the capitalist economy, by investing their body and subjectivity in their artistic practice, and sometimes to an extreme extent.

In the 1960s, when artists on a large scale began investing themselves in their artworks, whether in a cool style like Andy Warhol or in more radical body art practices, we meet the abject again in a figure like Jack Smith.

As an experimental film and performance artist, Jack Smith was a central figure of the New York avant-garde from the 1960s to his death of AIDS in 1989. He

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<sup>6</sup> Baroness Elsa has been rehabilitated especially by the 2002 biography by Irene Gammel, but also through the general rediscovery of female avant-garde artists by new generations of female art historians. An outstanding work is Amelia Jones' *Irrational Modernism*, in which she discusses Baroness Elsa's queer gender performance and presumed mental illness as an appropriate reaction to the mad rationality of industrialism – and a reaction completely in line with Dada ideas.



was a huge inspiration for artists from Ron Vawter and Richard Foreman to Andy Warhol. Warhol even developed his factory and alternative superstar system from Smith, who called his actors and models the “superstars” of his imaginary film studio Cinemaroc. Smith’s art circled around his worshipping of the 1940s Hollywood starlet Maria Montez, who starred in exoticist B-movies like *Arabian Nights*, *Cobra Woman* or *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. Smith completely identified with Montez. He made his actors dress up like her and would also perform himself as Montez in highly idiosyncratic remakes of her films.

With his transgender performance, posing in drag with his goatee beard, Smith seems to have been blurring fundamentally the boundaries of what we are able to recognize as a subject. When building his elaborate, orientalist set designs out of trash, and exploring an aesthetics of failure, consistently avoiding to finish his films and performances, he radically challenged the economic systems of the circulation of art, including both the ideal of the organic work of art, and the signature of the artist – that holy mark of unique originality around which the whole economy of art circulates.

In her dissertation on Jack Smith, *Disincarnation: Jack Smith and the character as assemblage*, theatre scholar Mette Risgård Tranholm argues that rather than absolute presence, performance may be about *becoming* in a Deleuzian sense: stable representation is transformed or, as Laura Cull has argued, deferred into a kind of differential presence, destabilising fixed categories precisely by never quite arriving at the final form, never quite being *there*: “To summarise, what I am calling ‘differential presence’ operates on the level of experience as that which undoes identity, makes us think and reveals other durations or ways of being in time.”<sup>7</sup>

The question is, whether this nomadic practice may be employed critically while still navigating and opposing the very mechanisms of exclusion that are exposed by the performative practice instead of falling prey to these rigid social structures.

### **Precarious lives**

Clearly, not all performance artists place themselves in an abject position to the extent that Jack Smith or Baroness Elsa did – and performance art is a much wider field than body art, since it may describe all sorts of collective and social work as well. But it is important to be critically aware of the precariousness and personal price that these two emblematic figures, and many others with them, have had to pay for their artistic explorations of society’s outskirts.

A more recent figure, whose entire artistic practice embodies the precarious figure of naked life in Giorgio Agamben’s sense, is Danish artist Nielsen, former-

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<sup>7</sup> Cull 2009, 7.



ly known as Claus Beck-Nielsen, presently as Madame Nielsen. Like Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Jack Smith, Nielsen in his or her work consistently and intentionally adopts abject positions and ambiguous identities. In fact, Nielsen asks whether it is possible at all to live a life beyond identity? Nielsen has adopted a series of identities, such as Claus Beck-Nielsen, Das Beckwerk, Werkführer Nielsen, bin Nielsen, Madame Nielsen, etc. The aim is not a carnivalesque role-play, but to address the lives we do not recognize as subjects with the right to a place in society. The voices of the drowning refugee in the Mediterranean, the enslaved worker in Dubai, as well as all the dead of Europe's refugee and concentration camps, echo through Nielsen's work.

While Nielsen is clearly critically aware of the risks and double binds involved in this radical transgression of identity, he and she still deliberately place themselves in abject positions on the edge of society. Nielsen's performance of "identity as open source" acknowledges the postmodern condition, but at the same time never neglects the very real material and existential consequences of the fragile performance of identity.

These artists investing their own body and subjectivity in their artistic practice are emblematic examples of what we might call the figure of the performance artist. From this perspective, the performance artist inhabits a certain place in society, which implies a certain space of possible action, certain patterns of behaviour and codes of conduct. The performance artist as such constitutes a specific figuration of the place of art and the artist in society, which might be approached through some of these emblematic figures of avant-garde history.

Clearly, not all performance artists' work is auto-fictional. Just as many artists, especially since the 1990s, work increasingly with social interventions and in collaborative group constellations. But even these are often addressing the precariousness of the body, as we see for example in She She Pop's recent production *50 Grades of Shame*, whose title of course echoes the soft porn bestseller *50 Shades of Grey*, but combines this with Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, a play in which a group of young people's lives are seriously damaged due to their narrow-minded parents' sexual hypocrisy.

She She Pop's performance takes the form of a school lesson, where we learn about sex, body, and shame from experts and actors on stage. The technical clue is that all the naked or half-naked bodies on stage are merged and recombined through live camera projections, so that the strangest creatures emerge in front of our eyes. In She She Pop's performance, bodily shame is negotiated through live, almost Hieronymus Bosch-like creatures, but also strangely echoing the orgy scenes from Jack Smith's films, or Carolee Schneeman's *Meat Joy*, where bodies merge into strange new creatures – as literal figures of Deleuzian *becoming*.

What seems to be at stake in the precarious figure of the body artist is the fact

that the power to work across otherwise separate artistic and social fields, the power to open up new perspectives and acknowledge otherwise unrecognized connections, seems to come at a price of not just risk, but actual precariousness – a precariousness recently addressed in the critique of a neoliberal work-ethos within the art system voiced by Bojana Kunst, Isabell Lorey, Lauren Berlant, and others.

## **THE SOCIALITY OF PERFORMANCE ART: RECONFIGURING THE LABOUR MARKET**

### **Performance art collectives challenge the structural precarity of artistic production**

As Jon McKenzie claimed in *Perform or Else* (2001), performance art challenges norms (race, gender, class, borders of bodies, and nations etc.). Through its many versions of collective work, the genre challenges the limits and possibilities of sociality and organization, i.e. conducts something like research into the foundations of democracy. Looking at the landscape of performance art in theatre from the 60s until today, the presence of collectives in the history of performance art is remarkable.<sup>8</sup> A possible periodization of performance art collectives is of course difficult since all groups migrate between theatre traditions and decades.<sup>9</sup> But an attempt could be to name the first wave of collectives departing from the late 60s-70s as *director-driven*, starring groups such as The Performance Group (1967-1975) with Richard Schechner, which then became The Wooster Group (1975-) with Elizabeth LeCompte, Ontological-Hysteric Theatre (1968-) with Richard Foreman and even Forced Entertainment (1984-) with Tim Etchells. These collectives could be described broadly as developing their own practices and (cross)media expressions, working continuously together, centred around a director. The second wave we could call *discourse-driven* in the sense that they are associated with and aesthetically negotiating academic discourse within Theatre Research and Performance Studies.<sup>10</sup> Here, prominent (Euro-

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<sup>8</sup> We list here only collectives explicitly identifying with the history of performance art, i.e. not group theatres such as Odinteatret or Théâtre du Soleil that emerged during the same period.

<sup>9</sup> We could also have claimed to see performance collectives at the beginning of the 20th century in the cross-medial, temporary collaborations between pioneers of the historical avant-gardes. These performances grew out of environments and were collaborations between significant signatures from different art fields. An example is *Parade* (1917) by Picasso, Satie, and Cocteau. However, we will concentrate on groups working during the period when performance art was established as an independent and vivid genre, i.e. from the 1960s and onwards.

<sup>10</sup> Obviously, the Giessen collectives have been informed by the Institute of Applied Theatre Studies. The Norwegian groups have been connected to the strong tradition of Theatre Studies around Knut Ove Arntzen in Bergen.

pean) groups are Norwegian Baktruppen (1986-2008) and Verk Produksjoner (1998-) and the collectives founded during their studies of Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen: Gob Squad (1994-), Showcase Beat Le Mot (1997-), She She Pop (1998-), Monster Truck (2006-), and others. The fact of being a collective is very much becoming the problem investigated aesthetically and socio-politically for these *discourse-driven* groups. They are explicitly working with and for a non-hierarchical flat structure, refer to performance art history as their tradition, depart from political concerns such as gender or race, and challenge conventional aesthetic categories of time, narration, spectatorship, and space. The third wave is a tentative categorization of a tendency among young performance art collectives still *in the making*. The third wave of performance art collectives could be defined as *structure-challenging* in the sense of being informed and formed by structural precarity within freelance cultural production, and therefore grouping as a way of securing each other structurally and criticising neoliberal work ethics. Here, we could mention the aesthetically diverse and organizationally refreshing cobratheater.cobra, Breakfast Club, DANSEatelier and ongoing project, which have all emerged out of educations of performance art within the last five years.<sup>11</sup>

German theatre historian Kai van Eikels writes in his dissertation on performance art collectives that “performance art can be a laboratory or practicing ground for forms of collective acting”<sup>12</sup> and Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette claim that collectivism inevitably exposes and attacks “broader social and economic conditions of production.”<sup>13</sup> So, what are the current socio-economic questions and challenges examined and acted upon in today’s performance art collectives? We would claim that the third wave of performance art collectives are challenging the structures of work within cultural production and, more broadly, in neoliberal work ethics.

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<sup>11</sup> The following three collectives will not be explored further here, but can be captured briefly like this: DANSEatelier is a group of 13 alumni from Dance & Choreography at the Danish National School of Performing Arts, who, through a shared space, continuous daily collective practice, and performance nights with a broad spectrum of associated artists exercise an infrastructural performance where the shared space and continuous practice oppose neoliberal individualization and mobility.

Breakfast Club consists of 11 members from 9 different countries, all graduates from the Inter-University of Dance in Berlin, and attacks directly the privilege of the nation state. Breakfast Club redistributes national funding between its trans-national members and opposes the idea of privileged belonging. See also Schmidt 2017.

cobratheater.cobra is a network of more than forty members including theatre and visual artists, musicians, singers, and cultural scholars. The principle of organization is that of contagion: When a member conducts projects with non-members, those non-members can afterwards produce projects in the name of cobratheater.cobra, provided they invite and publish critique from a cobra member not involved in the project.

<sup>12</sup> Eikels 2013, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Stimson & Scholette 2007, 11.

American political theorist Wendy Brown describes with accuracy neoliberalism as an economization of political life as well as of all noneconomic spheres. The model of the market has entered the state, the city, higher education, and the private household. In neoliberalism, human capital is measured according to impact. Work is measured as individualized performance and private life is a part of your corporate identity. The legitimization of each act and each relation, at work and at home, is whether it is a good investment, beneficial to competition and growth. As Slovenian art theoretician Bojana Kunst has pointed out that the performance artist fits perfectly in with the capitalist imperative of constant growth, since the ephemeral art form constantly provides “the new”, radical, and transgressive.<sup>14</sup>

When looking at the current landscape of artistic educations implementing the Bologna Standards, a structural individualization corresponding with the neoliberal economization is taking place: students collect their ECTS individually, they go alone abroad on Erasmus-exchanges, they are – in study regulations – often told to develop their own aesthetics and they graduate with individual BA- or MA-projects. Simultaneously, a careerist hype is built up from the surrounding theatre institutions, presenting students’ work as professional work (without wages, with less production means), which urges the students to fit conventional formats (have a name/brand, fit into a one-hour-show, reduce set-design, and number of performers).

“What constitutes continuity amid the pressure of structural inconstancy?” feminist professor of English literature, Lauren Berlant, has asked, concerning the structural precarity of work in neoliberal regimes.<sup>15</sup> And we might continue: What constitutes focused and sustainable artistic work in times of imperative individualism and careerism? The third wave performance groups mentioned above propose other ways of performing and re-forming the economic and social conditions around the production of art. In various ways, the groups actively resist the conventions of individualization, of recognizability, and governable behaviour through what Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt has elsewhere defined as *infrastructural performance* (2018). Resistance towards structural precarity can have different forms: resistance can be critical – laying bare problems without solving them – and it can be constructive and/or sustainable. For now, we will exemplify how the German collective ongoing project perform their organization through the passion-free principle of *pragmatism*, which is a way of sustaining sociality and solidarity within the collective.

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<sup>14</sup> Kunst 2015, 22-25.

<sup>15</sup> Berlant 2011, 69.

### When pragmatism beats passion

It looks conventional and market-fitting: when scrolling down the website of ongoing project, the performance art collective seems like a regular performance group of seven members with a normal – or relatively high – production of *projects*.<sup>16</sup> In the short biography of the group on their website, the important educational institutions are mentioned and accompanied by a list of the prominent venues the group has worked with. In the right margin of the website, they have a roll of *tweets* mentioning their latest successes: a good review or a prize they have won. ongoing project obviously “plays the game” in the sense of providing the information which gives market value to performance art makers. They belong to a generation who knows how to promote themselves and work with social media, which in itself demands communicative and marketing skills, and doesn’t romanticize artistic work. It is quite an unspectacular biography compared to collectives from the discourse-driven and aesthetically positioned second wave of performance groups.<sup>17</sup> Put in a polemical way, there is really nothing “sexy”, “creative”, or “radical” in the aesthetic appearance of the collective. Ongoing project seems rather normal and representative for a new generation of producers in the cultural industry. Yet, one thing is remarkable in the biography: ongoing project sees itself as an agent from the political left, and has a sort of mission statement in their biography, which is concerned with class and artistic work, aiming for a revolutionary practice:

*Our work contributes to clarify the concept of art in order to support the formation of theory and strategy, which are both demanded by a revolutionary practice. In this context works concerning the avant-garde and the theory of class, state, and performance are arising. In doing so, we will also take into account both the methodological problems of such theories as well as their reflections in strategies of revolutionary groups.*<sup>18</sup>

This statement shows that the discourse-driven second wave has obviously not finished! The critical and theoretically informed tradition from Giessen – now probably also influenced by Bojana Kunst being professor there – shines through. When looking at the artistic outcome of ongoing project, they are focused on

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<sup>16</sup> Many artists have avoided using the term *project* as a categorization of artistic works since Bojana Kunst analysed the problematics of the projective living of performance artists: always working in temporalities of projecting the future through application and creating the past through documentation, rather than working in/on the present. See for example Kunst 2013 and Kunst 2015.

<sup>17</sup> See for example the biographies on websites such as the funny and decadent western movie quote, which figures as “the biography” of Monster Truck, or the laid back, virtuous-cool manifesto of Showcase Beat Le Mot, “when they rehearse, it looks as if they are sleeping, and vice versa” (my translation).

<sup>18</sup> [http://ongoing-project.org/index\\_about.html](http://ongoing-project.org/index_about.html). Accessed 27 December 2018.

Marxist problems and often the projects take place in suburbs or smaller cities, involving other social groups than artists. In 2017, they arranged a colloquium on the rediscovery of class awareness: eleven discursive sessions with speakers from feminist theory and social science, social workers, artists, activists, and sex workers. But how does the political leftish content transfer into the organization of ongoing project?

In an interview with Alexander Bauer, one of the seven members of ongoing project, about the organization of work, Bauer kept repeating the word “pragmatic”: that the collective seeks pragmatic solutions for working continuously together, which means to live close to each other, have a common space to meet, have two days of *jour fixes* for theory reading and discussions.<sup>19</sup> This could be an answer to the question posed by Lauren Berlant: “What constitutes continuity amid the pressure of structural inconstancy?” Ongoing project has established a “normal” working day structure, which opposes the 24/7 temporality of constant availability in freelance work. It is rather predictable than passionate. Berlant describes the freelancer as a character preferring “entrepreneurial precarity (...), giving “herself to the dream.””<sup>20</sup> Being passionate is the petrol of the freelancer in the cultural sector. American feminist Kathi Weeks traces the figure of *passion* back to the imperative *love* of reproductive work criticized by feminists in the 70s. The reproductive work in the household has been mystified and difficult to criticize, since feelings have covered “the role of economic motives and utilities.”<sup>21</sup> The figure of the happy housewife is a fantasy figure “that erases the signs of labor under the signs of happiness,” Sara Ahmed notes.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, we could say that the passionate artist is a fantasy figure and her intimate romance with work makes her maximize her performance, while self-realization, love, and passion pay off as salary and shadows the need for workers’ rights.

When the artists – in concert, collectively – become pragmatic instead of passionate, all that is air has to become solid again: regular hours, salary and basic rights are in demand. As an example, ongoing project distributes authorship in order to secure a basic income for its members. Rather than all seven being present in every decision, the collective takes on several parallel projects in order to earn enough for the living of its seven members. Bauer coins a structural problem of the – from a programmers’ curatorial perspective – much desired form of collective work: “No one pays seven fees, rather two or three.” The need for professional pay under professional circumstances had already been a demand of ongoing project during their studies in Giessen. As a critique of the increasing

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<sup>19</sup> The interview was conducted on skype by Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt on 20.3.2018.

<sup>20</sup> Gibson quoted in Berlant 2011, 76.

<sup>21</sup> Stimson & Sholette 2007, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ahmed 2010, 573.



professionalization of the art student, the seven members – together with peers from Giessen – chose to perform a students' strike at Maxim Gorki in 2013.<sup>23</sup>

The programme of Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen has – as an artistic programme within a university – since 2008 been navigating within the structures of Bologna. Furthermore, it has a tradition of critical self-inquiry towards logics of one's own production. Yet, as Meike Wagner has pointed out, there is also an increased awareness of branding, marketing, and professionalization in the field of applied performance and theatre studies.<sup>24</sup> Ongoing project performs organizational pragmatism as a form of resistance towards the neoliberal demand of passionate work. Their critique manifests itself in organizational performance rather than in aesthetics: in their everyday, they secure space and time for sociality and common saturation in thinking.

The context of the Bologna Standards – individualization, standardization, mobility – and increased early professionalization within artistic education is important in order to understand the proposal of ongoing project. We would call the anti-spectacular pragmatism of the collective a sort of critical “answer” to exactly the professionalization of the studies as well as the imperative intimate love relation with work. The website, the biography, the tweets, and the salary-distribution could all be read as signs of highly professionalized self-marketing and distribution, but this, together with the insistence on spending time together, is a way of making the collective sustainable and robust. Polemically, we could ask if this organizational performance is then just a strategy to become resilient in the neoliberal art market? But we can also claim that sociality is what is being taken care of structurally, when a performance art collective starts working 9-5. To meet again and again with the same few people, rather than socialising with a broad network, is a way of building resistant solidarity. As the theatre director of Maxim Gorki Theatre claimed that “Art is revolution or nothing,” a member of ongoing project and participant in the artist students' strike answered:

*Art is revolution or it is nothing. Revolution is the re-cultivation of all social relations. Ergo art is re-cultivation of all social relations. The conclusion is that art only exists as an emerging practice that has a consequence on all conditions. Because of that, art is impossible in this society as it exists, ergo: there is no art.*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The Maxim Gorki Theatre invited art students to take part in “Rehearse Revolution” at the theatre with a paying audience looking for “young talents,” advertising the unpaid offer to the students as “an opportunity for participating artists to present themselves without pressure” (The Boycott-Group 2013:22). This interpellation of the unpaid, careerist subjection was answered by the students with a public calculation on the main stage of the expenses it costed them to take this opportunity and followed by a strike, a plenary session, a court case as well as further talks between students, audience, and the theatre management.

<sup>24</sup> Wagner 2016, 11.

<sup>25</sup> The Boycott-Group 2013, 25.



Through the infrastructural performance of younger performance art collectives, we see how the very form of performance art collectives has (again) shifted from being aesthetically and discursively challenging to being (also) organizationally challenging by becoming “normal” and pragmatic, rather than ground-breaking, provoking, and passionate. Reclaiming normality, it seems, has become a sustainable answer to the structural precarity of artistic work. We wonder how the students’ call for a social revolution feeds back into the presumably careerist tendencies within education and theatre institutions today: might performance art and its potential solidarity through infrastructural performance be the exact framework needed for rethinking all conditions within theatre?

## **PERFORMANCE ART AND EDUCATION AS CRITIQUE AND CHALLENGE OF THE CAPITALIST WORK ETHOS**

### **Research-based performance as a critique of capitalist norms of productivity and overproduction**

Performance art produces knowledge that overflows our common understanding of what knowledge can be. However, this knowledge production could also be seen as an *over-production* that mimics the capitalist production mode and meets the demand for knowledge production in knowledge-based societies. How can performance art escape this trap? How can performance art and artistic research do something else?

Since the 1990s there has been a focus on artistic research and at the same time, art has adopted research as a strategy in its artistic practice.<sup>26</sup> Theatres have created spaces for artistic research and new genres have appeared such as *lecture performance*, *performance installation*, *knowledge exchange performance*, and *performance as exhibition*. These genres use different research strategies as theory, interviews, data, or historical documents and can be seen as material or immaterial laboratories.

The use of research and knowledge in the artistic process and in performance may be conceived of as a reflection or mirroring of the growing knowledge-production and information overload in different spheres of our daily lives and in

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<sup>26</sup> It is difficult to localize the exact moment when artistic research and research in the artwork became visible. One could argue that it follows the information society emerging from the 1970s. One could also argue that it is a continuation of important artistic developments in the 1960s and 70s. What is important here is to underline that it marks a shift in artistic practice and, therefore, it cannot be reduced to ‘artists always doing research as part of their working process’ since the research is now an immanent part of both the work process and the work. From being a marginalized artistic practice, research-based art now lives in its golden days. Jan Verwoert has remarked with irony that the easiest way to legitimize your artwork right now is to label it as “research-based art” or “art as a form of knowledge production.” Jan Verwoert: “Why Is Art Met With Disbelief? It’s Too Much Like Magic” in *Cookie!* p. 94.

society in general. This development is complex. On the one hand, it seems that performance art adopts strategies of knowledge production in order to legitimize its status at a time when knowledge has increased its economic value. On the other hand, there *is* a critical potential at stake, because artists can pose questions such as: What is knowledge? What isn't knowledge? What knowledge can be produced and what not? By whom? And where? The question is, if the meeting between objective and subjective modes of knowledge enables new ways of thinking?<sup>27</sup>

Research-based performances do not think for us, but invite us to think along. When confronted with a research-based performance we might ask: *Can I think with this work? Does it question, challenge, or negotiate the knowledge I have of the world? Can I engage differently with the world after this experience?*

Irit Rogoff's concept *criticality* can help us qualify these questions.

### **Critique, criticism, criticality**

In her theoretical and curatorial practice Irit Rogoff has pointed to the disruption of dichotomies between theory and practice. *What is a theorist?* she asks and answers: "A theorist is one that has been undone by theory."<sup>28</sup> The job of the theorist is not about accumulating knowledge but about taking a position, where one is always ready to give up knowledge and security in order to rethink structures. The theorist occupies a field of possibilities enabling different potentials.

A key concept in her terminology is *criticality*. Rogoff describes how within a short period we have moved from criticism to critique to criticality. *Criticism* is characterized by the discipline of applying values and judgment on the analyzed object. *Critique* is linked to deconstruction and post-structuralism and makes it possible to critically examine the naturalized values and truth claims of knowledge. Critique has been very important in the uncovering of existing cultural injustices. The problem with *critique* is that it still stays on the outside – at a distance – in order to expose the hidden structures. With criticality on the other hand, one is *inside* the problems that one is seeking to solve – one inhabits the problem:

*[criticality] is taking shape through an emphasis on the present, of living out a situation, of understanding culture as a series of effects rather than of causes, of the possibilities of actualizing some of its potential rather than revealing its faults. [...] criticality is therefore connected in my mind with risk, with a cultural inhabitation that performatively acknowledges what it is risking without yet fully being able to articulate it.*<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For a good discussion of knowledge production and non-knowledge see Maharaj 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Rogoff 2008, 97.

<sup>29</sup> Rogoff 2006a.

An embodied criticality means that we are embedded in the material we are working with, building on critique but working from an uncertain ground where the aim is not to perform critical analysis but to inhabit the culture that we are examining at the same time. Criticality is about giving up already tried structures, unlearning something old in order to think in a new way. In that way, the concept can be used as a theoretical tool to discuss the exchange between knowledge and arts.

Research-based performance is exactly about *giving up, moving away, or being without* secure knowledge or accepted values and truth claims. In research-based performance there is no possibility of staying on the outside. One is always on the inside of the process, trying out, testing, thinking. The research-based artist may use critique in this process, but the thinking is always situated *within* the process. It is a performative mode where meaning takes place here and now while the process is unfolding. Meaning is neither situated in a following moment of after-reflection nor is it immanent – *always already there* – waiting to be exposed.

### **Criticality in research-based performance practice vs. practice-based research**

The demand in practice-based research is often to move *outside* of the process and to view and determine the process from there. This may be a problem because the practice-based research stays with a demand for critique while the research-based performance practice has already moved to an embedded criticality.

We might look at Rogoff's concept *smuggling* as a concrete example of embodied criticality.<sup>30</sup> Rogoff introduces the concept to see whether it – with all its illegal connotations – can be an active, political mode of inhabiting the world. Smuggling produces resistance without being completely marginalized from the system. Seen as a practice, smuggling operates on its own terms without conforming to the dominant operating system. If we look at research-based performances, we can see that knowledge, methods, politics, and theories are being smuggled from one field to another without following visible rules. We might say that they produce thinking through different protocols.

Rogoff has argued that artistic research has political impact through the movement of different platforms: The contribution of the artist is to access knowledge in a different way, through other methods than the conventional academic ones,

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<sup>30</sup> Rogoff 2006b. Interestingly, the theorist Mika Hannula has also used the concept of smuggling in the context of artistic research but with different connotations than Rogoff. See Hannula 2009.

and to *queer* it so that it escapes the endless repetition of the same knowledge.<sup>31</sup> This *queering* of knowledge seems to be a point of departure for how to work with research in an education of performance art.

### **CODA: PERFORMANCE ART CHALLENGING THE ARTIST SUBJECT, ITS SOCIALITY AND THINKING**

Through our three complementary perspectives, we have tried to identify some distinctive aspects of performance art, regarding its history, politics, and aesthetics as a basis and motivation for an autonomous education in performance art.

There is, of course, a certain irony or paradox apparent in this ambition. While performance art could and should be considered as an open, interdisciplinary field, continuously changing and moving between genres and modes of thinking, there is still a certain strategic and pragmatic sense in defining it as a separate genre. For it is precisely because an education in performance art needs to place itself in an interdisciplinary field that it needs to be organized as an independent educational programme. Performance art should not be reduced to just another programme in performing arts education, since it is not really about mastering a craft or technical skills, but rather about rethinking the conditions of artistic practice today as such: the production of the subject, its sociality and thinking. Performance art in education would insist on the historicity of a challenging genre and a certain approach to artistic thinking. As such, its students should be free to combine knowledge and practices from different artistic and academic fields of discipline. This means it should not be reduced to any of the existing disciplines in performing arts education, but should have its own programme – but a programme that enables students to find their own way between different modes of thinking and practice. Consequently, this would, in a Danish context, where the *super*-education at the Danish National School of Performing Arts encompasses all aspects of traditional theatre production, mean a programme which challenges traditions within theatre in Denmark and beyond: A challenge of the traditions that divide art and academia, separate role and private life, and drive young artists to work passionately in obsolete hierarchies and to uphold bourgeois stage formats.

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<sup>31</sup> Comment made by Rogoff at the *Conference on Reflection* at The Danish National School of Performing Arts, October 7, 2015.

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