

Living in Trans: Transition, transformation, translation

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¹ 'Inventory: Dance and Performance', Vienna, 3-5 March 2005, Tanzquartier Wien.

² See 'translation' under <http://www.wikipedia.org>

³ Boris Groys during 'Back from the Future: the Post-Communist Condition' (Zurück aus der Zukunft) panel discussion with Ekaterina Degot, Peter Weibel, Martina Weinhart and Slavoj Žižek at Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 13 October 2003 (manuscript translation from German by Tomislav Medak).

⁴ Members of BADco.: Pravdan Devlahović (dancer and choreographer), Ivana Ivković (dramaturgist), Tomislav Medak (philosopher and performer), Ivana Sajko (dramaturgist and playwright), Nikolina Pristaš (dancer and choreographer) and Goran Sergej Pristaš (dramaturgist and director).

⁵ 'Confessions' premiered in December 1999 at Teatar &TD, Zagreb. The piece was directed by Goran Sergej Pristaš in the repertory of Teatar &TD with Ivana Sajko (dramaturgist), Damir Bartol Indoš, Nikolina Pristaš and Pravdan Devlahović as guest performers in the actors' ensemble of the theatre.

Below: BADCo. 'Deleted Messages' 2004.
Photos: © Bernd Uhlig



When I was recently writing an intervention for the congress 'Inventory' in Vienna¹ I tried to answer the questions: why do we produce ourselves, promote ourselves, distribute ourselves, and explain ourselves? (2005) By 'we' I tried to point to an 'illegitimate class' of artists-being-theorists-being-curators who are working in the international market of performing arts and are habitually presented as exemplifying eastern European participation in new performance developments.

Enumerating the possible forms in which those artists 'take place' (Agamben 2004: 13-17) I overlooked one of the decisive forms: translation. I am not so much interested here in translation as 'an activity comprising the interpretation of the meaning of a text in one language — the source text — and the production of a new, equivalent text in another language — the target text, also called the translation', but more in translation in Euclidian terms, as 'an affine transformation of ... space which moves every point by a fixed distance in the same direction. It can also be interpreted as the addition of a constant vector to every point, or as shifting the origin of the coordinate system'.²

So here I would like to write on the idea that to present eastern European art in any possible form (for example live performance, exhibition, festival, publishing) always depends on the fact, pointed out by Boris Groys,³ that the basic difference between eastern and western European art is that art from eastern Europe is always seen as information on the state of the society of its origin. The difference then is where something takes place. Starting from that assumption, we should not only rethink the presentability of eastern European art projects through their potential to transform space, but also through their intrinsic (and simultaneously formal) process of shifting the origin of the co-ordinate system in which the artwork is produced. In order not to be too general, I will try to exemplify the problems of translation and its relation to the presentability of content and context through concrete artistic experiences I have had working with the performance group BADco. and the project Zagreb — Cultural Kapital of Europe 3000.

BADco.⁴

BADco. was founded in 2000 by two dancer / choreographers and two dramaturges. In 1999 what was to become the core group of BADco. worked together in collaboration with the repertory ensemble at Teatar &TD, Zagreb in *Confessions*.⁵ During this project the core group recognized the possibility of thinking and working together on non-repertory, or independent, productions that, whilst creating structural difficulties in economic terms, would guarantee specific artistic dynamics and mobility. One of the most challenging points in *Confessions*, which dealt with the prescriptive character of theatrical space, was the spatial thematizing of the correspondence between the monumentality of the provincial and decorative history of Croatian theatre, and the mythologizing of the deliberative force of early performance art and 'new theatre' in Croatia. The close connectedness of production structures in the 1960s and 1970s, and the centralized system of programming and production, created a short circuit of interests between the theatre establishment and performance art 'rebels'. I say rebels because most performance art action (rather than production) was marked by reactionary, breakaway, rebellious force. Most of those

performances did not refer to concrete theatrical pieces or personas, but exploded as outrage, as a protest of accumulated bodies, bodies that discovered their own languages only through the process of their de-socialization.

In 'Confessions' we framed one of the most rebellious of all Croatian 'historical' pieces of performance art (**Man-Chair** (1989) by Damir Bartol Indoš [see pp. 122–134 following]) in a stage replica of the neo-baroque portal of the Croatian National Theatre. **Man-Chair**, renewed and performed by the same author twenty years later (1999), with its rebellious energy supporting 'the power of theatrical madness', became a 'ready-made' within our new piece. The ready-made performance became a perfect tool for the inner dramaturgical power game that supported the climax of the performed event, but its destructive force could be only represented by (again) a dramaturgical shift — a space emptied of empathy. Some clear lessons emerged from this work:

- that we as a group of artists were interested in the productive rather than reactive politics of performance
- that the collaboration of all the artists involved was there for further individuation, not in terms of authorship, but in terms of the individuated experience of perception, language and productive force;
- that our 'products' / performances do not represent the relational aspects of authorship, the micro-politics of the group or the organizational aspects of collaboration, but, rather, influence the protocols of performance (not dramaturgy);
- that dramaturgy, through its prescriptiveness — the fact it is always already in a state of emergence — and through the obviousness of its perspectival strategies, is the ultimate space of power in theatre;
- that dramaturgy is always already there even if we do not give it emphasis, since its perspective always excludes the surplus of all that is vague and volatile, thus allowing the clearness of its strategies to proceed;
- that our relations are not thematized, but translated into the procedures or paths of the performance (for example two solos presented as duet [**Solo Me**] and discussions on the piece within the performance [**Rib-Cage**]);
- that performances are only markers in time, singular results of the homogeneity of the past in the here and now;
- that performances are not simply reflective of time but become productive in time, in time yet-to-come (Negri 2003), through the sheer force of their inventiveness.

So, we repeated the exam. Back to Damir Bartol Indoš and his performance **Man-Chair**. This time, an exam as translational act. Two dancers, two dramaturges and Indoš started to work on a common perception, the language and creative force of **Man-Chair**. The result was an empty outrage. Internally, we were at ease, in 'the empty place where each can move freely' (Agamben 2004: 24); externally it created an uneasiness in the perception of the informed and expert audience because it borders on the historicity of the piece. It was coming out enclosed, bordered, exclusive; the piece reinforcing the defiant agency of its 'ready-made' specimen. As a protest against nothing, without affirming any identity, we produced a manifesto of co-belonging. That manifesto was not an expression of identification with anything, but an act of appropriation of the (re)presenting of history in order to allow the possibility of new things to come as points of reference.

The process of translation of Indoš's piece was not therefore a production of an equivalent text in another language but a translation in terms of a re-coordination of the origins of the space of emergence. For an international audience, those who didn't have insight in the history of Croatian performing arts, the piece also created an uneasiness especially because of the ready-made's resemblance to 'third theatre' practices (an objection that was never articulated), but we have been constantly seduced by its *ressentiment*, its state of repressed feeling and desire that becomes generative of values, in Nietzschean or Foucauldian terms.

In *Diderot's Nephew* (2001) we used as a generic matrix Denis Diderot's synopsis of 'the perfect philosophical play', the unwritten *Socrates' Death*. But the performance was not a 'rewriting' of Diderot's ideal play. Instead we performed Diderot's problematization of the rhapsodic and rational mind/body from his *Rameau's Nephew* (Diderot 2002 [1762]) under the mask of the outline of *Socrates' Death*. The process of tracing, or copying the deep structure onto the surface was mimicked: Since the lines from *Socrates' Death* in the performance were not actualized the performed material was developed from the tension between possible references and nonsense. The process of tracing or copying the deep structure onto the surface was mimicked, replacing the lack of sense, rationalization and pure embodiment.

The process opened a new space to translate the structure of the outline into the new coordinates of *Rameau's Nephew*.

In *Solo Me* (2002) the intention of two choreographers to make separate solo pieces was translated into procedures to combine them into a duet: procedures of negotiation, doubled interpretational logics, problem-solving strategies⁶.

Ribcage was a piece that translated the power-game inscribed in Ivana Sajko's play (2001) into a 'performance machine', which would connect to the realms or machines of politics, family, war in Iraq. The play is the dialogue between Gulliver Son (a prisoner) and Shooter (an investigator and executioner), but the author of the play is also subjectified, written by her stage directions (or dialogues with her characters) in the first person singular. The performance included five fixed modular scenes, which are then thematically manipulated by discussions taking place in between these scenes. When the war in Iraq started, the performance lost its thematic tension, but that opened a new translational perspective — how to move and give a life to a 'symbolically dead performance' in the same direction through the vectors of re-animations. Setting up the piece in a state of in-actuality, we found ourselves needing to persist in a manner of the performance: 'the state of things in which each thing persists as it is'.⁷ The imprisonment of the character from the play was thus translated into our imprisonment in performance.

The strategy that *Ribcage* used was completely opposite to the one used in *Deleted Messages* (2004), where we made an effort to cancel any thematic perspective and to translate the organizational aspect of generative principles of the performance into the realm of the audiences' self-organization inside a controlled (CCTV surveillance) but 'soft' space of quarantine. We imported arbitrary, alien logics into the formative principle of the performance material — a generic matrix, taken from Thomas Lehmen's *Funktionen*

⁶ For further description and analysis of this piece, see *Frakcija 26/27* (2002/2003).

⁷ John of Salisbury, cited in Agamben 2004: 27.

BADCo. 'Man-Chair' (2000) with
D.B. Indoš, Nikolina Pristaš and Pravdan Devlahović.
Photos: © Ratko Mavar



systematization (2004) — into a complex of relations that correspond to the performers' as well as the audience's behavior. In this way we abandoned our responsibility for compositional thinking about performed material and structures. This opened the field of possibilities for the audience's processing and self-evaluation of their inclusion and exclusion in the organization of space, the flow of information and the dynamics of their perception. The performance then exists only at the level of intensity of smooth, non-forced interaction, which does not cancel the public space of the performance (by being involved in the necessity of interaction) but opens an awareness of difference and the positive impact of defection on both sides: performers' and audiences'. Any totalizing point of observation becomes impossible.

Defection is also a possibility/necessity offered in the pieces **Mass for Election Day Silence** (2004) and **Fleshdance** (2005). In the Mass the audience is seated inside a completely sound-proofed room. The only way to hear the text of the play, which constitutes the material of the piece, is by the use of earphones. But the intriguing point in the performance is its concert-like set up. The diminution of the sound source results in the dominance and exaggeration of the sound source — a direct connectedness between the performer's voice and observer's or listener's sensors, which offered either an informed completeness or a split perception from reluctant will on the part of both performer and listener. The only freedom one could take in this overtly politicized space was to exit, a defection from the space of dictation into a silent room of set-up and coordinate systems. A similar symptom marks **Fleshdance**, where the audience is seated at a minimal distance from an extremely wide and narrow performance space divided in the form of triptych with three dancers. The spatialization of the work demands that the audience either edits their perceptual structure (always having to choose and combine what to look at) or focuses on the optimization of a one-to-one experience with a chosen dancer.

But, in all of these performances, what are the co-ordinate systems we are talking about? They are always opposites, not correspondences. Their relations build-up on opposites such as identity—inactuality, compositions—protocols, living—dead, generated—imported, focused—spliced and so on. But since the performance is always of the world, since the interrelated points of the performance are always related to the other points in the world, we discuss an internal translation, a translation from one to the other coordinate system, which are two (or more) of the multiple one.



Cultural Kapital

Shifting the origin of the co-ordinate system paradoxically creates misunderstandings in translation. Translation work also produces a reality with a different temporality of perception: those works become markers of being late in the same time. To understand it better, we might use as a metaphor the 'transitional period', that period of change from one to political system to another, used as a keyword for eastern European post-communist time. The idea of a transitional period — similar to socialism being a period of the withering away of the State — is based on the durational idea of transformation evaluated by democracy's performance indicators (McKenzie 2003). But the specific quality of transition comes out of an intensive approach to the problematization of the 'transitional moment' (here and now), not the transitional period (understood as a massive time metaphor in which one acts now and then) that demands reconnection of our optic and sonic links to the world we live in through a different approach to the production of time. In the process of transition, of becoming the same, just more redistributed and actualized, one is always late, especially in comparison with the engaging speed of capital.

The project Zagreb — **Cultural Kapital 3000** (ZCK3000) is a project thought in-between creative and transformative approaches to culture. The platform

is set on reinforcing the incipient collaboration between independent cultural initiatives⁸ that investigate, each in its own and very different field of expertise, the changing conditions for cultural and social action which come as a consequence of the growing local importance of translocal economic and communicational exchanges, and work on the reform of institutional frameworks to increase the presence and participation of independent culture. (from ZCK3000 documents)

Mimicking the representative model known as Cultural Capital of Europe, we work on the reinforcement of cultural collaboration in a non-representative framework of cultural policy, research, theory and education, but always in connection to artistic production. The question that follows the project is what actually is an event of ZCK3000? And do the separate projects of ZCK3000 present the project itself?

The translation of the transformative project into a single presentation is traced constantly by the character of presentability. To set up a public presentation out of a transformative project's complexity asks for an adequately complex language. That kind of presentation often produces misunderstandings because there is no expected simplicity and there is no univocal representable content, but mainly proposals and prescriptions. The discourses of such a presentation are again parasitic discourses of social and political theory, aesthetics and cultural policy. No translation of that presentation could have creative character. There is no artwork we would produce to present ZCK3000, even if it included a number of artworks and pieces. The in-actuality of the project, translated within any of those possible objects (material or discursive), might become creative only through accepting an offer to 'take place' as such, to take up projects transformative force. To make the project actual means not only to match its presentation with its realization but also to shift the origin of its co-ordinate system.

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⁸ The founders of the project were Centre for Drama Arts (performing arts), Multimedia Institute (new media), Platforma 9.81 (architecture and media), What, How and for Whom (WHW) (visual arts).