



HELLO, HI THERE!, PHOTO BY WOLFGANG SILVERI

ANNIE DORSEN talks to UNA BAUER about various dramaturgical mechanisms in operation in her work. This conversation took part in the framework of *10 Days 1 Unity LAB*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, in November 2010. It was modified recently, to include some new insights that have developed since.

UNA BAUER: CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR IDEA OF A DIRTY WINDOW AS A DRAMATURGICAL CONCEPT? DO YOU CREATE ANALYTICAL TOOLS SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN CONCRETE REALITIES AND TOTAL ABSTRACTION, AND START FROM THEM WHEN YOU MAKE YOUR WORK?

Annie Dorsen: I use the “dirty window” as a metaphor for a certain feeling I would like to give the audience. When the window is too clean, the viewer sees straight through it to the view beyond; when too dirty, one only sees the window and nothing of the outside. So I like a medium-dirty window, in which the gaze is in tension back and forth between the view, and the window itself. In other words, sometimes there is an absorption in the content as content, and other times a fascination with the thing itself, structurally, formally, or as concept. I never started from an idea like this. I generally have it in mind as I make the piece, though. I am pretty sure I always start with a content. And it takes a long time before there is anything like an idea for a performance.

SO HOW DO YOU GET INTERESTED IN A CERTAIN CONTENT? WHAT’S YOUR CRITERIA FOR BEING INTERESTED IN A CONTENT?

In a way, a very, very obvious content. In 2004 I picked up Alexis de Tocqueville out of sheer despair that Bush would be elected again. And in 4 years this turned into a

piece in which I offered all the “real estate” of time/space inside a performance for sale to the public to fill with their own desires/ideas. I kept the title: Democracy in America.

HOW WAS THAT FOR SALE? AFTER THE SHOW? METAPHORICALLY OR LITERALLY?

I made a website — people could register, fill out a form with their idea, I would get back to them with a price, and they would pay. Literally, pay in money to have their idea included in the show. The piece was nothing but these ideas of the public. I didn’t add anything. I just arranged and implemented.

SO WHAT KIND OF IDEAS WERE THEY? LIKE... I WANT THE ACTOR TO WEAR PINK? OR I WANT THE ACTOR TO SAY THIS OR THAT? DOES THE WEBSITE STILL EXIST?

Some people gave one line of text — some gave a costume idea — or a gesture — or a sound — and so on. I let the website expire, it’s gone now, so you can’t see the whole list. But I think I made some errors in execution, in fact. I didn’t do enough transformation of concepts. I had an idea that I should try to interfere as little as possible. I saw my role as that of providing a service — rather than “making a piece”. And I’m not sure now if that was the right move. I was quite convinced at the time. But I wasn’t totally happy with the result. Because of course, everything was transformed anyway. I couldn’t get it pure enough.

HOW DID IT LOOK LIKE AS A RESULT?

It looked like a strange vaudeville. Or live television surfing.

SO WHAT DID YOU DO IF TWO PEOPLE PROPOSED DIAMETRICALLY OPPOSED THINGS? HOW DID YOU DECIDE?

It didn’t actually happen that we were tested this way. We made all purchases transparent on the website. So people did start to respond to each other. But no one had the idea to purchase, for example, that we should not do something someone else purchased. It’s a pity.

DID YOU HAVE A PREPARED STRATEGY FOR DEALING WITH EVERYTHING? OR WAS IT DEVELOPED ALONG THE WAY?

It was developed along the way. We had no idea what sort of things people would buy. I imagined people doing much more difficult tests. Or purchasing things that were not physically possible, or that would have required millions of dollars or something.

BUT YOU DIDN’T OFFER ANYTHING IN ADVANCE? IT WAS ALL THEIR PROPOSITIONS?

We had categories on the site. So there was a category for text options, movement options, abstract concepts. I would love to do it again. And get it stronger in the execution.

IT MUST HAVE BEEN REALLY FUN TO DO.

It was great in the development. And the concept and all the work leading up to the concept. The final product was... Well, let’s say many people are very fierce in their love for the piece, but I am not entirely satisfied.

DID YOU GET ANY FEEDBACK FROM THOSE WHO BOUGHT IT?

Yes. One or two were disappointed that we didn’t transform their idea into “ART”. They wanted to see their idea woven into some kind of seamless whole with the others. Other people were happy because they got their words on stage. There was a poet from Canada, a real disaster — in fact, it’s his text we use for I Miss [1] — completely shit poet — and he was soooo happy that HIS WORDS were spoken onstage in New York City. It made his life, I think. I should really write him to tell him about the film, that it is being screened in Los Angeles at a big film festival and so on.

DID THEY FEEL THEY HAD SOME OWNERSHIP OF THE PIECE?

Well, right, it was their idea, we did it as precise as possible according to their description. If they were not happy, then I guess they wanted to see something that is not what they said they wanted.

HOW DID YOU DEAL WITH THE DRAMATURGICAL STRUCTURE? HOW

[1]

ANNIE: The poem as originally submitted is a rather soupy love poem, a man telling his ex-girlfriend all the things he misses about her, her perfume, her laugh, and so on. I created a single-shot film of a 5-year old girl reading the poem. Or rather, she is being fed the lines by an off-stage female voice, and she repeats them. It is shot quite close up, the camera still on the girl’s face, and as the viewer sees her face so intimately, various processes become visible — issues of cultural formation, language, the notion of acting, a widening split between words and their meanings. At times the girl seems to have no idea what she says, the words are just sounds she repeats, at other times she latches onto a phrase she recognizes, or she gets uncertain about a statement whose atmosphere she can sense, but doesn’t totally get. I Miss is about being able to watch language preceding understanding, and how it forms our identities without our participation.

DID YOU DECIDE WHAT COMES AFTER WHAT? BECAUSE THIS SOUNDS LIKE AN ACCUMULATION OF IDEAS.

It was like making a collage. I didn't develop a good procedure for this. It was too chaotic a process.

OKAY, BUT IN A COLLAGE YOU DON'T HAVE TEMPORALITY.

Yes. And a two-dimensional collage is not linear. So, Democracy is a linear, time-based collage. But in fact we did do quite some simultaneous stuff — so not purely linear.

BUT DID YOU DO ANY KIND OF DECISION-MAKING ABOUT WHAT COMES WHEN, OR WERE YOU JUST DOING STUFF IN THE ORDER THAT PEOPLE WERE PAYING FOR THEM?

No, I made decisions. Again, not a very pure process. An area I'd like to think more about if I ever do it again. In one sense it's the key question. To also understand that the space and time of a performance are not neutral. There is a power dynamic in this space.

DO YOU THINK YOU WOULD DEVELOP SOME KIND OF PROCEDURE THAT WOULDN'T INVOLVE YOU SECOND TIME AROUND?

We alluded to this with some purchases. We sold the first word at a much higher price. And the last word. But we didn't do enough thinking about how to value the time/space. Where is the good time slot? Is the first ten minutes best? Or the last five? When is attention highest and so on? As though you were buying advertising space on TV.

YOU WERE OFFERING CATEGORIES IN THE BEGINNING.

And, sadly, but not surprisingly, most people stuck to them.

...AND THESE CATEGORIES WERE COMMON SENSE CATEGORIES.

Yes.

... WHICH IS, IN A WAY, THE MOST NEUTRAL STRATEGY OF DOING IT.

It did seem so. But I wonder if, in fact, it could also have been just a simple form. No categories, just a blank box for the user to input their idea without guidance.

YES, THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN INTERESTING. BECAUSE A STRUCTURE WOULD HAVE EVOLVED ANYWAY.

Yes, when people see what the others did before, then something might develop between them, with less of my direction.

DID YOU HAVE CHARACTERS AS CATEGORIES? BECAUSE THAT IS ALREADY SO DEFINING.

We offered the chance to assign a name to one of the actors. But no one did this.

HOW DID YOU DEFINE THE PRICE?

Again, quite arbitrary. Based on amount of labour, materials needed (if any) and amount of performance time the idea would take. So, actually, not so arbitrary.

WHAT ABOUT CONCEPTS?

Concepts were expensive. Themes were cheap. Highest priced item was the interpretation.

HOW DID YOU DO INTERPRETATION? I MEAN... HOW DO YOU INTERPRET WITHIN THE PERFORMANCE?

Part one of the interpretation agreement: I agreed that in all future discussions of the project (public or private, for press, no matter what) I would use the buyer's interpretation as the official interpretation. Part two: was a kind of certificate for the buyer with the agreement. Part three: the interpretation would be made available in the evening program as a separate sheet.

SO IF YOU TOLD A DIFFERENT INTERPRETATION YOU COULD BE SUED?

Exactly. I would be talking with you in those terms now. But no one bought it. It was very expensive.

HOW MUCH WAS IT?

\$2500. But we did a half price sale towards the end. Maybe it's not so much that

I'm unsatisfied with the result as I am unsatisfied with the public's behaviour!

WOULD YOU AGREE TO ANY KIND OF INTERPRETATION? SAY A TOTALLY RANDOM ONE. LIKE THIS IS A SHOW ABOUT A BUNCH OF ALIENS TRYING TO KIDNAP THE PRESIDENT OF THE USA. EVEN THOUGH NO ALIENS WERE THERE AND NO PRESIDENT WAS THERE.

Sure. No problem. Or “the piece is really about Annie Dorsen's latent paedophilia and rampant drug addiction” and so on.

WHAT WERE THE THEMES?

No one bought themes either. The public was awful basically.

SO WHAT WERE THEY BUYING MOSTLY? SUGGESTING LINES FOR THE TEXT?

Lines of text, lighting idea, movement ideas, a song, actions.

YES, CONCRETE STUFF. THAT YOU CAN “SEE” THE IMMEDIATE VALUE OF.

Correct. Quite boring.

YES, IT IS VERY PREDICTABLE BEHAVIOUR... AND NOT REALLY ENTREPRENEURIAL IF YOU THINK ABOUT IT.

People could have bought absolutely anything, including the right to claim authorship of the performance for example. They could have really tested the idea. But they didn't. So in the end the politics of the piece remained a bit inert.

WELL, YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN IN TROUBLE IF THEY DID.

But it would have been great to be displaced — to have sold my country, so to speak... There was one consortium. A group got together to buy a more expensive thing. But it wasn't very interesting. They bought that we had to make an audience member strip at every showing. And if we couldn't convince anyone, we would have to cancel the rest of the performance. But every night, someone stripped. I can imagine doing the piece in Zagreb and getting a very hard time — people asking complex questions.

SO IN A WAY, YOUR OWN DRAMATURGICAL CONCEPT DEFEATED YOU BECAUSE ITS POTENTIALITY WAS FAR MORE INTERESTING THAN ITS ACTUALITY.

Yes. Also true about the new piece, Hello Hi There (2010), by the way. Or at least I thought that might be true after the first few performances. Now that we've been touring for a while, yes, I understand something different about how the piece functions. In fact it is very sensitive to group dynamic — because the computers don't give anything back, as it were, they are unaware of how the audience is responding — so night to night the energy of the room is entirely a product of the audience's energy. Most nights it works great, exactly what I would wish, multiple responses, always changing — but we've had a few performances when the audience seemed to make a group decision that the piece is just very funny, or boring...and then you can feel all the thinking in the room turn off. But still I have the feeling that the entire range of consequences of the piece doesn't totally get actualized within the hour-long experience of the piece. Maybe it continues to open up for people in the hours or days after.

WHY DID THIS NEW PIECE DEFEAT YOU?

A good question — why is the potential more interesting than the result in this case? I think because in theory one understands the contingency at work, the potential alternate choices the bots could make, and the liveness of the operation. In actual, you see only one linear path through the database, and it's hard to really FEEL that there were other options, and that the computers are making choices in every second. That's maybe one part of it. Humans make all kinds of funny faces while we think. Computers have no visible process in that sense.

SO YOU DON'T HAVE THE FEELING OF CONTINGENCY, BUT JUST DETERMINATION.

Yes — we tried to show some of the inner processing. We made a little application

that bounced the processing onto the screen. An application that showed the console working. A graphic representation of the processing. Like a diagram. And it helped. But didn't solve this.

I SEE YOU HAVE CHOMSKY. HOW DID YOU GET INTO THIS DEBATE?

The performance always starts with: “the pursuit of this discussion, I fear, will inevitably lead to the question of meaning.” In fact I started the concept with the Chomsky–Foucault debate. I was interested in this big meeting between two legendary thinkers, and in the fact that they communicated extremely badly. So I got interested in the failure of dialogue to advance thought. Then I was also interested for two other reasons. The proposal of Chomsky, that all humans everywhere have enormous creative and political potential because they can invent new speech — this seemed challenged in a rather beautiful way by chatbots, who invent new language but ... are they creative? Do they have “political potential?” Then, too, I was interested in this moment of the early 1970s, when there was still some feeling in the air that revolution was possible — or, you could say, that feeling was freshly dead. And there seemed to be a kind of rhyme with the freshly dead optimism of AI developers, who thought in the 1960s that they could quite soon crack the code of human language production and create genuine thinking machines. By the early 1970s they realized —ah, perhaps not, it's not so simple after all. So in both the debate and in the technology there is a feeling of fading optimism, of reconciling with failure.

DO YOU KNOW ALL THE TEXTUAL OPTIONS OF RESPONSE... OR IS THAT ALWAYS RANDOM?

I know most of them by now. The database has about 3000 statements. So in a way it's not so big. And I adjusted things if they were consistently doing something horrible.

SO THE ANSWER COULD BE ANY OF THE 3000 STATEMENTS? OR NOT?

No, because it uses pattern–matching. So in practice there are not so many options for each statement. Sometimes as few as two. Sometimes as many as twenty. But usually not more. And of course, for creating a performance this is quite important because it means I can mess around with it until it has the potential to make a sort of sense.

SO WOULD YOU SAY THAT THERE IS SOME SORT OF LIVENESS IN THE PERFORMANCE?

Oh yes. It is live.

WHERE IS THE LIVENESS?

In the computers. They are running live. They are not playback machines. They are generating a new script.

BUT THERE IS A FINITE NUMBER OF COMBINATIONS?

Now, you could also argue — that because they have such a limited data-base, this affects somehow the question of liveness. But then I think we get into very interesting ontological territory.

IS LIVENESS DEFINED BY ARBITRARINESS? WHAT ARE THE PROPERTIES THAT MAKE SOMETHING “LIVE”?

We know the capacity for death is one. But “live” performers are not often dying. But they could. There is a nice text by Philip Auslander about chatbots [2], if you would ask for proof of liveness, this is the direction I would go. That liveness itself becomes a very muddy concept when you are dealing with chatbots.

YES, THEY ARE NOT OFTEN DYING BUT THE POSSIBILITY THAT THEY MIGHT IS WHAT GIVES IT SOME SORT OF AURA.

Yes, this is what Herbert Blau writes in response to Auslander [3]. Auslander writes that chatbots are the locus of a new kind of crisis of liveness.

IT IS NOT SUPER INTERESTING IF YOU HAVE ONLY TWO OPTIONS: DEAD OR ALIVE...

No, it's not a good argument. I can imagine all sorts of contemporary situations that seem to operate in a grey area between live and not–live. You feel that I am live now while we talk on skype?

[3]

Auslander quotes Herbert Blau, “Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre” (New York: *Performing Arts Journal Publications*, 1982), p.134. “In a very strict sense, it is the actor's mortality which is the actual subject [of any performance], for he is right there dying in front of your eyes.” Blau responds in the same issue: “Human nature of the bot: a response to Philip Auslander”, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 70 (Volume 24, Number 1), January 2002, pp. 22–24.

[2]

PHILIP AUSLANDER, “Live from Cyberspace: or, I was sitting at my computer this guy appeared he thought I was a bot”, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 70 (Volume 24, Number 1), January 2002, pp. 16–21

YES.

Because you don't know what I will say next?

NO.

Or because what I say is responsive to what you say?

NO.

Or because I remember what we've been talking about and could go back to earlier threads and pick them up again (chatbots cannot do that, except by accident). What is it?

I GUESS LIVENESS IS IMAGINED, IT IS FANTASIZED.

Yes, I think so too.

I GUESS I ALWAYS FICTIONALIZE AND ANTHROPOMORPHISE EVERYTHING. I TEND TO TREAT VARIOUS THINGS AS IF THEY ARE ALIVE... SAY MY FRIDGE.

You don't need to anthropomorphize me, I come that way already.

I DO A BIT ACTUALLY.

Because at the moment I am just words appearing on a screen. In the Auslander article, he writes about this potential confusion, that in a chatroom it could happen very easily that people could think you were a bot. And in fact, it does happen very often. He doesn't go so far in the text, but you could go quite far — how would you prove that you are not a bot? In a chatroom full of anonymous people, whom you don't know, have no shared history with, etc.

I GUESS THIS IS THE COMPLEX QUESTION OF AI. BUT IF YOU WERE TO SUMMARIZE WHAT WE DISCUSSED HERE, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE LINKS BETWEEN DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA AND HELLO HI THERE IN TERMS OF DRAMATURGICAL ORGANIZATION? CAN YOU DESCRIBE THESE TWO PIECES IN RELATION TO THE IDEA OF POST-HOC DRAMATURGY WE DISCUSSED AT THE LAB?

I suppose in both pieces I was looking for a procedure or mechanism that would sort of unfurl the performance, in which many of the aesthetic choices and large aspects of the so-called creative work are displaced, or you could say, subcontracted. Ha. In the LAB we read a text called “Procedural Rhetoric,” a chapter of a book on gaming. I got a bit over-invested in the title of the text, because I have been calling what I'm doing “procedural dramaturgy.” It's related to but a bit distinct from the well-known Sol LeWitt definition of conceptual art [4]. I am attached to this notion of a machine for making performances, but I don't call the execution a “perfunctory affair,” nor do I find that all of the decisions are made beforehand. It is a collaboration, somehow, between me and the concept. The concept guides the execution, perhaps, as a full partner in the creation, but the concept is not my boss. In computer programming, there is a constant testing of the code; the programmer writes a little program to do something, then sees what it does, then adjusts it, then tests again. Back and forth, again and again. So the process is not nearly as pure as the one LeWitt describes. It's much dirtier. But also somehow respectful of both the human and the algorithm. In the program for Hello Hi There I use the phrase, “an intimate collaboration between man and machine.” And I think it's like this: partners. As we always are with the tools we develop and use; they develop and use us back. We modify each other, continually.

[4]

“In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”

From “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,”
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