

Audience as participant in Performance Art

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It is a general term that the audience is co-present in a performance. The performer shares the same space, the same time and the same air with the present members of the audience. In a theatre piece these facts are similar but normally the actors have their "stage" or their character which they incorporate to distant themselves from the viewer. In performance art there is no distance: The performer is the subject and object of his or her own piece of art and also involves the audience into this multilayered relationship.

For my own practice the idea of interaction and a relation between me and the other human beings in the audience is a main point. Since 1999 I work in a duo (SystemHM₂T) and since 2000 in the association Black Market International. Both concepts share the idea of meeting in order to create images and interaction. The main issue is to get more out of a performative situation through the relation of differences.

If there is no "other" to relate to in a performance, I often choose the audience as partner and/or counterpart. Since 2002 I work on the series "Hand to Hand – a cultural exchange of cloth and more". This performance started with System HM₂t in Manila, Philippines. Mainly Marco Teubner and I were looking onto cloth as container of personal, cultural or economical values. Marco was wearing a suit made of 300 US-Dollar Notes while burning cheap Asian shirts with a small lighter. In the meantime I invited the audience to exchange cloth with me, piece by piece. I brought cloth with me that had a deep personal relationship to my life and I told each story of each piece, one after another, to the audience. In exchange of getting one of my belongings, they had to offer me a piece of their cloth and the story of the relationship with this piece. Each exchange ended with a shot of local Schnapps to underline the ritualistic deal we negotiated. After all my cloth changed into the different pieces of the Manila audience, the performance was over and the cloth was brought to the next station of the series. Since this first step, the work took place in Canada, Romania, Mexico, Spain, the USA and France.

Since I see performance art as a chance to get into a real contact with other human beings, this performance does go one step further: The performer steps into the background and opens the space for the audience as the main character for the interaction. My only role in this kind of ritualistic story telling is the position of a moderator or medium to bring out the stories from the audiences. Also this work does try to find an alternative way of globalization: Cloth has got a deep meaning in every culture. Through the meeting of the different stories and relations that the clothing pieces have, the audience closes a gap between the different countries and ideas which are contained in the clothing.

Beside these intercultural connections my deepest interest deals with the possibility to open up a situation where the audience and I get into a very private negotiation. Normally audience means to watch, not to be watched. In the case of Hand to Hand, the audience gets into really private situations: On one hand they have to undress. Nakedness is and will be one of the most private things in a society. Nakedness normally is only offered or being watched in places where people with deep personal relationships interact. In Hand to Hand I offer my naked body in the right beginning of the work when I clean it with rubbing alcohol before I take on the clothing which should be exchanged, to make sure that my body is clean. Of course the second idea is to present the nakedness of the performers body to "break the ice" for the audience members, who have to get partly naked during the process of the work.

On the other hand the audience members, who decide to offer their part in the contract, have to get into the space of the performer, set themselves into the situation of performing themselves and also offer a private story in front of the "others", which are now the rest of the audience members. This change in the role of the audience member who steps into the ring to interact with me is a very subtle moment: It is not easy to talk in front of a group of strangers about personal belongings and maybe very private stories. What surprises me the most is, that I did not only receive absolutely personal things with deep, deep meanings but also heard very touchy and private stories, mostly together with lots of other strangers, who whether me or the "storyteller" ever saw before. There was for example this young man in Quebec, who exchanged his green trousers with me, which he got from a former prince from Okinawa during a residency in Japan. The story the young man told was a beautiful and tragic love story where the prince lost his status to be together with a former Geisha, which actually got the prince the trousers. Why was this man willing to give away this piece of cloth and also telling this personal story? After the performance the man told me that the idea of the ongoing process of the stories and the cloth convinced him that this was the right time to get rid of this personal thing. This was not the only thing that impressed me during the years of travelling with this work: I received socks, which were worn at the wedding of the former owner. I received a ring that saved the life of a young Mexican woman. I got a woman's underwear which she put on to seduce a young man, who never appeared....sad stories, funny stories, and beautiful stories. This series is maybe as close as possible to the idea of the Indian potlatch or the gift in the ideas of Marcel Mauss. In order to receive a gift that means something personal without a countable, economical value, the performer offers a gift himself which is also related to a ritualistic situation in front of a group of people.

Another series that deals with the idea of audience participation is "Taschlich". Taschlich is a Jewish tradition that takes place on the first day of the year (Rosch ha-Schana). The believers go to a natural body of flowing water and empty their pockets from every crump or piece of food. This symbolic act should free them from sins and represent a new start.

As a German citizen with the knowledge of the dark history with the Jewish community in the Third Reich, I see the following performance as a kind of respectful gesture, compared with an interreligious imagery. In "Taschlich" I place myself naked in a row of heavy stones and burning tea lights. I step in front of one stone/tea light and put the melted wax over my naked body. Then I offer the audience a piece of paper that includes the following text: "Please write a personal burden on this stone that you want to get rid of!" and one of the stones and a pen. After a number of members of the audience wrote something on all stones, I ask them to attach the stones at my naked, wax covered body with scotch tape. Then I make my way with the load (between 30-60 kilo) to a source of water and throw the stones into it.

The reactions to this performance was always very strong: Members of the audience cried, others were very serious about the religious content, others wanted to discuss the role I took in this interaction: Did I see myself as a figure like Christ, who takes the sins of humankind on himself to free them? Of course this interpretation will never be accepted by me. Similar to "Hand to Hand" I am searching for a real exchange with the audience. When the members offer a real pain on this stone to me, I try to underline my serious wish to understand this pain in the action of putting the hot wax in a painful action onto my body. Also I want to spend some time with the burden of the audience in a real way: I attach the things that they want to get rid of, to my body and bring them to a place to find a ritualistic way to get lost of them. Of course performance art cannot heal in a shamanistic way. I am not a friend of esoteric believe and I do not think that artists are healers. But I believe and I made the experience that a real corporal action, done together with the audience in this relational way, causes a deeper intellectual and emotional process in the performer and the audience. An important part in a performance is also the reflection "after" the performance. Here again a real meeting can take place between audience and performer. There is no

curtain that is falling after we finished our work, especially not when the audience is also responsible for the creation of the living image that is finally cooperation between performer and public. In the case of Taschlich, there has to be a discussion that goes beyond the simple idea of the Christian image of taking the sins for the others. There is a political, historical side that deals with my origin. There is a personal side that has something to do with my philosophical and emotional idea of humankind. And there are all the different views and ideas that are brought in by all the different personalities of the viewers.

And here we are again at a core point that is so unique in performance art: There are always so many performances seen as there are people in the audience. Everybody brings her/his own ideas, backgrounds and expectations into this relationship. I could not work without this richness of possibilities!

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