

“The Document as Performance / The Performance as a Document”: notes on a research project

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Some statements about the relationship between performance and reality to start with. These statements served as provocations, as eye-openers for the research project I will describe. Art historian Hal Foster observes, in his influential study *The Return of the Real. The Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, that contemporary visual art, from the eighties on, shifts its focus from reality as an effect of representation – e.g. pop art – to reality as a thing of trauma. He notes that artists like Cindy Sherman present their subjects in such a way that the gaze of the spectator cannot but ‘objectify’ the artwork, as if there is no frame of representation anymore, no scene to stage it. The real, both in its common and in its psychoanalytical sense, has thus returned. Some artists, not satisfied with this gaze on the so-called ‘abject’, like Jimmy Durham or Dan Graham, start to explore another gaze, the ethnographic gaze. In identifying themselves ambiguously with real situations of repression or dispossession, they problematise the representational value of our anthropological data, exposing them as projections of the observer. This time, the real, the referent of the artwork is pointing at the spectator, it becomes a (blurred) theme.

Second statement. In an interview, together with director Max Stafford-Clark, the playwright David Hare talks about their collaboration in so-called ‘verbatim’ theatre, drama about the ‘real facts’ in big societal and political issues, ranging from the privatization of British Rail to the war in Iraq. Asked after the function of this drama, Hare says: “It does what journalism fails to do”. Hare has repeated this position on other occasions, even in front of high representatives of the British press. Although he often takes his liberties about what real people might have said privately in a known situation – e.g. the private conversations between Tony Blair and George W. Bush in the play *Stuff Happens* – the claim for representativity, the idea that an artwork is open for judgment on journalistic criteria is remarkable. Especially when you assert that journalism itself doesn’t meet its own standards anymore. The statements of Foster and Hare, even when they deal with radically different artistic genres, seem to contradict each other. Foster confronts the contemporary artist, in his object as well in his discourse, with his impossible neutrality. Strategies of the real, like the exposure of the abject or the use of anthropological data, should be unmasked or at least criticized as performative devices. Hare on the contrary, exactly wants to hide these performative devices behind the authority of theatrical illusion in order to create maximum veracity on the political issue.

RITS is the school for audiovisual and performing arts of the Erasmus University College in Brussels. Since almost ten years, academic research projects are funded by the school itself and by the VUB, the Brussels university we are associated with. *The Document as Performance. The Performance as a Document* is a representative example of the ‘academic’ policy within our school for several reasons. In the first place, the project unites, conceptually and practically, different media, documentary and theatre in the first place. Secondly, it is a collective research project, in which practitioners, in radio, visual media and drama collaborate, each from their own point of view but with more than usual curiosity to transgress their idiosyncratic attitudes, with theoreticians, equally ready to leave their ivory towers of abstract reflection. Thirdly, it is practice-based research, where the main goal of our school – i.e. to provide pedagogic trajectories to the next generation of artists and media professionals – is fully integrated in the research program. The research project, now reaching its – always provisional – conclusion, focused on two main research questions:

1. What is the relationship between document – both in the sense of ‘documentation’ as in the sense of ‘performative paper’ – and theatricality in contemporary performance practices? Questions about this relationship dealt with the ‘truth claim’ of this genre – the dramaturgical issue – and with the consequences of the nature of this material on acting attitudes – the performance issue. This could be called the ‘David Hare question’.
2. Does an artist’s desire to observe and, in a later stadium, to integrate artistically attitudes which are at least partly foreign to his own social identity, result in different forms of performance or even in a different kind of ‘performativity’? This is the anthropological question or the ‘Hal Foster question’.

Apart from that, we were concerned about archiving preliminary research results. The elaboration of an archive, with our own work as its primary basis, could eventually clarify more general questions about the ‘memory of performance’, a theme several artists approach in the form of reconstructions and re-enactments.

The basic methodology or, if you will, 'laboratory configuration', was the workshop. The organization of workshops, separated from the regular curriculum, allowed both students and researchers to meet, in intensive confrontations of four or five consecutive days, modes of artistic work difficult to provide for in a normal school trajectory. In 2009 we organized parallel sessions led by Berlin theatre maker Hans-Werner Kroesinger, Dutch theatre and film maker Carina Molier and Brussels based documentary filmmaker Sarah Vanagt. In 2010 the Mexican-American performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Slovenian theatre maker Janez Jansa were invited. There were also separate workshops by the German collective Rimini Protokoll and the Lebanese theatre maker Rabih Mroué. These workshops were open to our own students of drama, film and radio, and to applicants from outside. So these 'laboratories' showed a good mix of known and unknown participants, thus apt to deal with many contingencies – exactly the reason why they form the cornerstone of our artistic research.

More details about this research practice, mainly illustrated by two of these workshops, allow to formulate some preliminary conclusions.

Hans-Werner Kroesinger creates, since more than 15 years, theatre performances about important global issues: the Eichmann trial, the Armenian genocide, suicide terrorists, the Truth Commission in South-Africa, etc. His work is based on extensive research of the subject matter, often by revealing obscure documents or hidden versions of the facts. With this material he creates a narrative, he translates bureaucratic or pathetic language into dramatic voices, thus causing curiosity with the spectator. Curiosity not based on pure empathy or pure distanciation, but on the idea that a certain voice, heard in a theatrical context, could generate a-typical reflection on fundamental societal issues. These reflections are, as an experience, very different from regular consumption of news from the mass media. The 'liveness' of the theatre adds to the veracity of the narrative, but the spectator stays, in Kroesinger's performances, conscious of the theatrical construction. In his workshop, Kroesinger used a text, which was the core of his production about the Rwandese genocide in 1994, *Ruanda Revisited*. This text was a transcription of an interview with general Roméo Dallaire, head of peacekeeping forces of the UN, who dramatically failed to stop the murderous escalations of violence. Dallaire suffered a heavy depression after the departure of the UN, he committed suicide attempts, but five years after the facts he analyzed mercilessly the cowardice of the international community. A group of students, most of them studying theatre, read the text of this broadcast interview with Dallaire, reorganized it as the libretto for an oratorio and combined it with excerpts from the report by a Belgian parliamentary committee on the murder of Belgian soldiers during the Rwandese genocide. The result was a rough sketch of theatrical possibilities, with effects ranging from sentimentality, over cynicism, to genuine anger. From a research point of view, it was interesting to see how the status of the documents themselves – a long interview about personal moral indignation, or officialized one-sidedness in a parliamentary report – affected the acting attitudes. The question of the plus-value in veracity, by live performance, was put straightforward, but the answer was further blurred.

Another workshop was led by Janez Jansa, formerly known as Emil Hrvatin. Emil and two artistic accomplices changed their names in 'Janez Jansa', then the prime minister of Slovenia. They became members of his political party, not to engage in real politics, but as an experiment about the notion of personal, political and national identity. They documented their identity change, obtained new passports and other official documents and briefed the art world and the general public regularly about the incidents their metamorphosis caused. The passport is of course the central object in this operation, since a passport is the most 'performative' document imaginable: it literally opens and closes door of 'Fortress Europe'. The three Janez Jansas manipulated their identity by using bureaucratic strategies. In the workshop, we made an attempt to manipulate history more generally by forging documents, performative or not, and creating a performative environment to show them. We should present a documentation about two artistic events: one in the past and one in the future. A future event has all the properties of illusion and imagination – you can invent whatever you want, it stays fantasy –, but the status of a forged past event is different. A maximum of authenticity can be obtained by documenting a context – in this workshop: the theatrical neo-avant-garde of the seventies, combined with the anti-psychiatric movement – that refers to known and proven narratives. The result created a sense of uneasiness, also due to the difference in skills of the participants. The combination of actors, documentarians, sound designers and theoreticians, resulted in a disconcerting communication, especially when inserting personal biographies of the participants. It felt like the re-invention of theatrical illusion, a strange feeling after post-modern irony.

Both experiments suggest that the relationship between document and performance could result in a of 'thinking machine'. Lebanese theatre maker Rabih Mroué assumes that artistic performances should have the ambition to stimulate the mechanisms of human thinking. Mroué uses videos of suicide bombers and giant posters of these 'martyrs' (now worshipped as popular heroes) as theatrical objects. Not to create empathy or abhorrence, but to force a reflection on the blurred veracity of these documents. He proposes personal readings; he links these icons with – real or fictitious – events from his own biography. A comparable thing happened during perhaps the most successful experiment of the whole research project. Carina Molier took actors, directors and cameramen to a parking garage where asylum seekers held a hunger strike, eventually to last more than sixty days. The film makers created a visual essay on the ethics of documentary: how far can you go in observing a dying witness of injustice? The theatre makers dressed the healthiest activists in tuxedos and made them sing, in the center of Brussels, the national anthem. This performance was not exactly a 'thinking machine', but it forced its onlookers to reconsider their official identities, to reflect on life and death, literally, if only for a minute. It forced them to reconsider the intellectual challenges contemporary theatre is faced with, even when the ability to create basic empathy continues to be an elementary performative skill. The methodology of intensive workshops proved to be fruitful. Although student participation in research projects is contrary to traditional academic criteria, we believe that this is the only way to develop productive and reliable research tools for artists, especially for artists of the future. We can do without white mice, but we need a laboratory filled with human beings, aware of their artistic sensibilities.

We are not ready yet to reach conclusion of our research project. *The Document as Performance. The Performance as a Document* has officially ended, the laboratory is transformed, but the methodology will be continued. In the forthcoming months we will try to formulate subtle answers to both the Hal Foster and the David Hare questions. Perhaps we will talk about performative truth, or about thinking bodies, or about the impossibility to represent real death and suffering. But we have a lot of documentation to view and to analyze, we have gathered an archive which is both artistically and intellectually extremely rich.