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Theatre as a Place of Self-Empowerment

The Example of Gob Squad: Before Your Very Eyes

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Abstract

This article examines the theatre as a place of empowerment, with a focus on the post-dramatic collective *Gob Squad* and their performance of *Before Your Very Eyes*. What is unique about this study is that it addresses the issue of the classic relationship between the generations and its reversal – here, it is not the adults acting out theatre pieces for the children, but rather children act out how they see the world as children, with the audience made up of adults. The piece plays with notions of time and space, closeness and distance and the interweaving of the theatre and media spaces. The aim of the following reflections is not so much to engage with the various theoretical perspectives on "self-empowerment", but rather take as their starting and reference point an example of performance practice which created an exceptional event and a community whose peculiar experiences are seen in the context of an understanding of the *theatre as a place of self-empowerment* which allows for deviation from social norms and rules.

The future will be confusing.[1] (Tim Etchells)

The self always manifests itself in its perspective of personal development as a form of deviation. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty)

1 Introduction

In author and director Tim Etchells' latest play *Tomorrow's Parties* (Frankfurt/M. Mousonturm 2012), we witness the following scene: a woman and a man climb onto two wooden boxes, in the background a string of coloured lights like those seen at a circus – nothing more. Facing the audience, they discuss their visions for future social systems, frequently interrupting each other.

This simple piece highlights what theatre has always been about: addressing the most important issues confronting humanity. Here it takes the form of a postmodern narrative theatre of "showing," with the specific distancing that is characteristic of Etchells' theatre.

[1] The quotation was shown at an installation in the Mousonturm Frankfurt/Main on its reopening on 5th September 2012.

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Performances such as this one use theatre and performance art as vehicles to reflect the fact that questions about the self are becoming increasingly significant in the 21st century. Self-image, self-promotion and, as suggested in this volume, the concept of "self-empowerment" are becoming more and more important when faced with the danger of being consumed by a media-dominated world. Foucault discussed the issue of the necessity of practicing "self-empowerment" in his later works as a necessary skill for a critical assessment of power (Foucault 1993: 27, 29).

The ever more frequent media scandals demonstrate what happens when the self is empowered through various media. Every time we view a digital picture, our own profile becomes – technologically – visible and accessible to unknown observers, as evidenced through the NSA scandal and the Snowdon affair. In response to this, a form of resistance movement has developed among the younger generation: wikileaks, the emergence of Anonymous and the Occupy Movement as instances of self-empowerment. The worldwide activities of flash mobs, which since the 1990s have intended to bring everyday situations to a standstill – or interrupting them – in a multifarious, collective, very individual and hedonistic way, are also a key part of the movement. On a broader popular level they reflect the art form of site-specific performance and site-specific theatre. This art form has attracted increasing attention by using not only everyday and media spaces, but also special spaces with a historical background, such as landscapes, industrial wastelands, etc. In doing so, it has enlarged the scope for different performance practices: theatrical elements are moved to spaces other than the theatre and, vice versa, performative elements from everyday life are transferred to the theatre. In this way the boundaries between everyday life, media and theatre spaces intersect in a variety of ways and open up horizons for spatial possibilities: for political, historical and medial spaces and — as is shown in the following account — also for spatial possibilities in the relationship between the generations (cf. Liebert & Westphal 2015; Westphal 2012a, 2012b; 2015).[2]

The current discussions of aesthetic and cultural education have not remained unaffected by these developments. At present, the discussions are focusing to an increasing extent on questions regarding different forms of cultural participation and knowledge mediation. In recent years, a number of models have been developed in which professional theatre, dance and performance artists have tried out new approaches with children and young people in various contexts, going beyond the scope of the traditional forms such as school plays and youth theatre. Viewed from aesthetic and social perspectives, the debate about the more recent performance approaches appears to hold enormous potential for education. Viewing theatre as a space for experience, it is no longer a matter of theatre supposed to have a morally enlightening effect, nor is it a question of a psychological theatre of empathy and identification with the great roles of world literature. First and foremost, theatre is seen as a social

[2] Several editions of the international journal Performance Research (UK) are devoted to this phenomenon.

and aesthetic space in which the self can be experienced as another person, by addressing the way in which we communicate with one another: "The subject matter, the stage and the actors always look back at me," as Hans-Thies Lehmann summarized in a public discussion at the conference *Heimspiel* in Cologne (2012).

New ideas are currently coming from projects that give children, young people and students the opportunity to view the theatre as a site of "self-empowerment" – as a space for "rehearsing deviant behavior". The notion of "deviant behaviour" is borrowed from the performance group LIGNA, who in their most recent audio-video-play, *Oedipus. Der Tyrann. Eine Befreiungsphantasie* (Hamburg 2011), speaks of an "experimental piece" in the "rehearsal of deviant behaviour".[3] This play without professional actors not only simply challenges the audience to carry out recorded instructions given via a headset, but also to listen to the text taken from Hölderlin and contemporary authors such as Heiner Müller, spoken by actors. The audience themselves create relations between the spaces: the space of the encounter with the other visitors, the performance space and the audio space. The piece inspires us to reflect on the role of the spectator as a *response*-ible witness, on theatre *as* theatre and also on theatre as a "historical" and thus evolved space. Furthermore, theater is experienced as a *textual space* and perceived in a mediated way through the "eventfulness of the performance" (cf. Dreyer 2012: 294). Thus, the performance creates elements in which the audience members have to participate, in whatever way, "within the constraints mediated by the piece" (ibid.) and within the constraints mediated by traditions and possibilities that arise from the past and the demands of the future. This approach is less concerned with preconceived patterns of interpretation that need to be understood than with self-empowerment; to become able to perceive and access the situation through action, at the same time defining one's position and attitudes. Theatre can, as Dreyer proposes, be thought of as an intervention: empowerment that does not "bring about a liberation from historical determinants; however, it can be viewed as an attempt at a critical suspension of these determinants, as an attempt *to become an event*" (Dreyer 2012: 296). In this example it is the spectators themselves who, in a collective yet individual experience, succeed in finding a mutual response. A participant describes this ambivalent relationship as a structural element in the following way:

> "For me it was an especially impressive self-experiencing in the group, as I was constantly forced to decide whether to join in this barrage of instructions that deprived me of any control, yet then to experience what wonderful images are produced. All the participants are transformed into a harmoniously interacting overall composition – an artistic process is set in motion, in which I myself am a creative participant, although in reality

[3] Waldenfels (2012: 180) speaks of deviation from the philosophical perspective when something different or other than what is called for emerges. Consequently for him a radical deviation means that something new comes into being in which the experience diverges from itself.

> just an obedient puppet. I found this ambivalence exciting and forceful: a juxtaposition of being creatively active and being passive and deprived of control. And I think this is also decisive in educational matters, the paradox of empowerment to self-empowerment or the control of self-control." (A participant in the performance Oedipus. Der Tyrann. Eine Befreiungsphantasie speaking at Performances of Self-empowerment conference, University of Koblenz-Landau Campus Koblenz, 5 September 2012)

This statement makes it clear that theatre as a space with possibilities for the liberation of the self – LIGNA formulates it programmatically as a "liberation fantasy" – is to be seen neither as an external facilitation of autonomy nor as a struggle for recognition. Rather, the self is accessed – to use Merleau-Ponty's paradoxical conceptual model – *in contact with the self by means of the distance from the self* (Merleau-Ponty 1966: 253).

I would now like to consider in greater detail an example of contemporary theatre *with* children *for* adults in which the relationship between the generations acquires a very distinctive character as an empowerment fantasy. What is under consideration here – using parts of an interview with Sarah Thom, one of the members of the Gob Squad performance group – is the children's view of the world of adults, the possibilities of the space of media (in this case working with video) in relation to the theatre performance space and to the reality of the children's day-to-day world(s), as well as gaining new insights through video/theatre/art *with* children, this being more artistic than educational in its approach.[4]

2 Spatial possibilities in the relationship between the generations

Children's theatre is usually characterized by being produced by adults for children. Or another variant: in school plays, children act in front of schoolmates and parents and put on plays written by adults or conceived by teachers. Seen in this way, children's theatre is an opportunity for education and a space which creates the opportunity to establish collective experiences and make them transferable. In the past 15 years, a number of groups have adopted an unusual third approach by developing a play professionally *with* children *as* children *for* adults.

2.1 Theatre with children for adults

Over a two-year trial period, the Gob Squad from Berlin and Nottingham, with its core of seven members, prepared a performance of the final part of the *Before Your Very Eyes* trilogy, together with a group of children between the ages of 6 and 14 from Gent in Belgium (premiere in 2011). Several formata come

[4] Cf. Pauwels' (2012: 57) reflections on the conception: Art cannot be misled.

together here. Firstly, the approach that the group shares with the children for this project should be described:

> We try and explore the point where theatre meets art, media and real life. As well as theatres and galleries, we place our work at the heart of urban life – in houses, shops, underground stations, car parks, hotels or directly on the street. Everyday life and magic, banality and utopia, reality and entertainment are all set on a collision course and the audience are often asked to step beyond their traditional role as passive spectators and bear witness to the results. (Sarah Thom)

For the *Before Your Very Eyes* project, the children were asked to improvise based on how they imagined the process of growing up to be. In an interview[5] Sarah Thom, a member of the group, describes how they work with the children:

> With the kids we wanted to work how we work by ourselves. What do we need in rehearsals when working on a new concept to generate material to reveal ourselves. First we like to have a closed comfortable environment, we like to have cameras etc. So we made sure that this is the environment the kids would work in too. We didn't want to play with theatre kids. (...) What we wanted to do as well, was, we didn't want just to do a piece "about" kids. The actual piece was meant to be a show with kids for adults, that was the Campo concept, this was not in any way children's theatre. (...) We wanted the kids to understand they could not do it wrong. All they could do was be themselves. You are just you. The more you are "you", the better it is. If you don't know, say: I don't know. If you don't want to do it, say: I don't want to do it. Because: all these things are part of our work. (...)

Characteristic features emerge from these statements: for example, the aim is not to find "theatre kids", and the piece is not "about" children. Rather, the idea is to find children who involve themselves in the performance from their perspective *as* children with their observations of themselves and others. Together they carry out small research assignments on the topic and rehearse the piece. During the rehearsals, which span over two years, the play evolves in a process that – and this is the unique aspect of this method – incorporates the changes the children go through as they themselves grow up.

2.2 Structure and dramaturgy of the play

On entering the theatre space, we see a group of children already on the stage – in a space that is closed to the actors but open to the audience. The children are behaving as they would in their own room: reading, sprawled out, jumping around, etc. A boy suggests a game of blind man's buff. The audience take their seats. The lights are turned down and the play begins, one would

[5] The interview with Sarah Thom, excerpts of which are presented here, took place on September 7, 2012 on the occasion of a performance for the reopening of the Mousonturm, Frankfurt am Main.

think, a second time. Starting with a frozen tableau, the children once again begin the game of blind man's buff, but are then interrupted by an off-stage voice which reminds them that they are part of a performance and expected to contribute to the theme. The voice, representing the world of adults, comes from a loudspeaker located above the stage, so that the children look up to it, as they would to an adult, when they listen to it. As in real life, the adult voice allows the children to carry on, or interrupts them, criticizes the game or expresses approval and gives instructions. Later on, when they try to open a dialogue with the voice, it becomes clear that the children are dealing with a "technical" or "canned" voice, which then falls silent and leaves the children to themselves. This is an extremely suspense-filled and insightful element in the production which raises the question of original and copy, and which highlights the issue of the separation of the body and recorded voice. This question is also taken up again as the scene is resumed. While the children are dancing in their *Lebenswelt*, they are at the same time projected onto large screens, before they then jump live onto the stage – as it were, out of the picture – and continue dancing. One might think that this was a third beginning/appearance. A further level is incorporated: the transition from the picture space/life space of the children to that of the performance/fiction space.

During the course of the play, a variety of scenes demonstrate a wide range of attitudes towards becoming an adult. The children are told to grow up – one child stands on tiptoes, a boy pulls the legs of a girl, etc. Here, in a humorous way, the difference is made clear between the child's idea of growing as a physical process and the concept of becoming an adult as *becoming a different person*. During the scenes, the rhythm changes from a harmless, disorderly and fast game to an increasingly slower ritualized play *as* pubescent youngsters, punks, 40- and 90-year-olds, then finally transitions to a death scene. The play takes a grotesque turn when in one scene the children are told to speak "adult words". The role assigned to the children? by the off-stage voice is one that conflicts with what we expect from children. Sarah Thoms comments:

> There were times where we wanted to put the children in a very different position. For example, there is a section which is from Woody Allen's film "Husbands and Wives". They just speak the words in a very monotone way, without emotion. We found it very interesting just to hear what were clearly adult words coming out of the children. We didn't want them to act or pretend to be grown up, but just to say these words. How does it look? How does that make us feel seeing children speaking with such an obvious adult text?

There is a further intensification of the scene in the sense of a moment of "empowerment" when one of the girls "steps out of" her adult character by handing her wig to a fellow actor, who then takes on her character in interaction with her video image. She steps out of the mirror *in front of* the stage with direct eye contact with the audience. There is thus an unexpected collision of three spatial levels: the acted imaginary space of the performance inside the box, the video-space on the screen, and the intermediate space created by

the public audience space and the girl on the proscenium (as well as other spaces, such as the acoustic space including the video camera in the box operated by the children themselves with the music playback and the off-stage voice, and the visual space directly above the stage displaying the text of the running English translation). The relationship between closeness/intimacy and remoteness/distance, as well as presence and absence on stage and on screen, is refracted in the interplay of all these elements – the picture on the screen, the children acting with their mirror image in the box facing the audience, the girl who "steps out of" her character. The interplay of these instances further highlight the paradoxical relationship of closeness to distance.

2.3 Working with video

An important element in this piece is that the Gob Squad works with video recordings on stage. Stage and media presence, closeness and distance, are brilliantly brought into play in a wide range of nuances and of relationships. Both the audience and the actors experience the difference between the lifetime on stage and the mental picture of a future: a play with present, past and future, both for the recipients and the producers. Sarah Thom describes how they work with video:

> We often make a screen so we are not directly in front of the audience. In "Room Service" the audience watch us via four TV monitors. In "Super Night Shot" we are present only on screen, and in "Kitchen" the live action takes place behind a large screen. So we really create a fourth wall to hide behind. This creates a very comfortable situation, we feel safe. When we have a camera and a reason to speak there is a liberation. I think everyone now has a very sophisticated understanding of technology.
> Most of us carry around phones with sophisticated recording devices — we are comfortable with them, they are in common use, it is universal understanding. We are interested in this universal language. People are always recording weddings, birthdays, family events, even banal ordinary events. People are comfortable with this technology. So it was not as if we are taking something and mystifying it. We were using something which is very domestic. (...) The way we are able to speak to camera helps, gives us a voice. That makes us able to speak. And it is so commonplace. We found another way of communicating/performing with the camera.

Against the background of this approach, questions arise from the perspective of the audience. So Roselt (2005: 125) asks: "What do closeness and intimacy mean in the theatre and in video art? What has a greater impact upon the audience: the sight of a body on the stage or on the screen, or both in equal measure? What is the original and what is the copy when the audience's gaze has to switch back and forth?" During the play, the children give us answers to the question of how they experience themselves as actors in the medially produced spaces. The question of what is genuine and what is staged is a part

of the production itself when, for example, in the beginning of the play, the unrehearsed game of blind man's buff is repeated. It is the repetition that makes clear that the first game is also staged *as* children at play. Here is a reflection on the difference between the unrehearsed game of the children *as* children at play, and the game determined and regulated by the production. In this way the production reveals its methods by using repetition to highlight the differences.

2.4 Theatre as lifetime

Our performance shows us the process of linking play-acting with the experiences of the children, and using the media familiar to them from their everyday lives as a medium of reflection for a play with oneself as another person in front of others. In this way the lived and experienced time, the acting as another person, as well as the experience with the various spaces, are integrated into the play itself. What the audience observes is the creation of distancing, determined by the doubling of spaces and perspectives.

In the video on the screen, the children interact with a slightly older version of a particular child on the stage. The 6-year old boy "Little" Robbe in the video asks the "older" boy Robbe on the stage what it is like to grow up, what puberty is like and how things will change and whether he, Little Robbe, will grow any more. "Old" Robbe answers very much as a youngster in the throes of puberty:

> Why do you ask such stupid questions? I'm in puberty, my whole life long and especially in the evenings. You'll discover it for yourself one day, so I won't tell you anything about it. You've got your private life; I've got mine. If you want to know more about it, check it out on the Internet. And don't look at me like that, with your puppy-dog eyes. I know that trick, I can do it as well (looks at the younger Robbe in the video with puppy-dog eyes). Look, I know you better than you think, that's not the way to be successful.

What in philosophical theory is called the splitting of the self is embodied here and made visible by the means of the theatre. "The self is formed by splitting and dividing" and in our case is manifested as *self-distancing* (Waldenfels 2002: 204). In this scene, Little Robbe opens himself to a future self. He does not know in advance how he will develop and, at the same time, the older Robbe in the character of the pubescent boy looks at Little Robbe as he himself once was. Thus, always with the future or the past in mind, the self is never identical with the temporal background from which it stands out (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1966: 253; 484).

In another scene, the 13-year-old Ramses watches the first video recording that was made of him as a 10-year-old for use on stage. He says: *"What, that's supposed to be me? That's not me."* He is now three years older than when rehearsals started and his voice is breaking, he has reached puberty. He hears himself say something from the past that no longer rings trues in the present and that makes him feel ashamed. This scene originated more by chance in a rehearsal situation when Ramses had been asked to bring along any kind of

object and to talk about it. Sarah Thom describes the situation for us from her point of view:

> The first time we met Ramses he introduced himself and took out this love letter: "I'm really sorry," he said. It was so impressive. He blushed. He allowed himself to be so exposed and vulnerable, he was so courageous. We had a camera and he sat down and talked straight to it, told his story.

The scene ends with Ramses telling the off-stage voice to stop its remarks about the love letter from the past, angrily asking what the off-stage voice could possibly know about him.

Not all the children could speak English equally well, so a translator was used. This element – using the voice as a way of framing the production – was also of pivotal importance.

The use of the "canned" voice as well as the use of video on stage, partly recorded beforehand, partly live during the performances, makes us aware of a difference between the live situation and the interaction with video projections in the theatre play with regard to the experience of space/time; I/the self/the other. Both audio and video reflect and mirror the difference between the actual performance and the lifetime. Thus it is a calculated "gameplay" with present, past and future. Here, theatre is employing media for reflection of an unusual interaction with oneself. In an interview at a performance in Geneva in 2011, Berit Stumpf, one of the members of the group, speaks about the connection between real space and theatre space:

> So we are constantly in the box. The children grow and grow, we kept it on the video. They asked themselves questions about the future. When I am 40 what will it be like to be older? We realized that there was a constant dialogue between themselves and the older self. They confront themselves with their expectations. What we do is confront the artificial part with the real world. Either we go outside, really like put some theatre out into the street, and we bring it back into the theatre. We always bring these two worlds together.

It becomes clear that this is not a theatre that reproduces existing content in the classical sense, but a theatre of *showing oneself*, as an interweaving of multiple time-spaces: transforming media space-time, stage time-space and biographical time.

2.5 The stage as a mirrored room

The basis of the play we described above is a stage situation that – and this is to be understood with a touch of irony – is designed to observe living people, like through an aquarium at a zoo or at a research laboratory. It is a glass case with one-way mirrors on the inside walls, and which is not transparent to the front (as soon as the spotlights are trained on it), flanked on the right and left by large screens on which videos are projected, recorded by the children themselves

in the rehearsal process or during the stage performance – the fifth wall, to use Roselt's terminology (cf. Roselt 2005). The children are performing to an audience which is not visible to them and therefore only imagined, and can only see themselves reflected in the mirror or as their "past selves" on the video screen. At the same time the adult audience catch a reflection of themselves. The unique quality of the fourth wall is that it permits multiple meanings. First, it is a reference to conventional theatre. Here, however, turned around as a medium of reflection, the fourth wall can at the same time be interpreted as a paradox. The stage as a theatre-site is refracted through the self-referential manner of acting and combined with the extension of the acting space on a fifth wall in the form of screens for video recordings. Sarah Thom reflects on the confrontation in the rehearsals between I and me, self and other, as a process of differentiation:

> The other concept was to divide the kids and the audience, the kids viewing only a reflection of themselves, with the audience also viewing the kids, being allowed to see without being seen. As in social experiments, the audience becomes the scientist watching the subject. When we were rehearsing the kids were trying out everything, gazing at their own image, seeing how it looked. That "thing" we were trying on – they were testing it out. How does it feel? It's not me but it's like when you try on a persona and it's looking at how we create identities. Who is this? How do I get comfortable with this? How do we build this "thing"? How do we generate, create this identity, this person? How we look. How we stand. What we wear. How we try things out to see how they feel if they suit us — if it is us? We were very interested in that, this was very present, the trying on. Does this feel good, this "different me"? The children feel at home in the box, they say it is a "home from home", very comfortable.

The children's experience is: I see myself as who I am as another person. Lacan observed that viewing one's own image in a mirror fascinates children (Lacan 1973: 61f.). They sense in it the contrast between the sight of their body, as seen from the outside and as the other might see it, and the image that they have they of their own body, likewise the contrast between the "I" as object and the "I" as the experience of a consciousness. The children reflect on their experience in their self-referentiality and reflexiveness in the following way:

> So Aiko (10 years) tells us: 'Everything gets videoed and actually we grow throughout the performance.' And Tasja (14 years) says: 'It seems to me that you discover things about yourselves while doing it, things you didn't know yet about yourself. When they ask you questions, you have to look deep inside of yourself and then you find answers which you didn't know you had inside you or that it was even a thought inside you, you only discover it while performing in this piece.' (Mousonturm Programme 2012)

3 Conclusion

The characteristic feature of performance models such as the one presented here is that they open a crack between the world of children and the world of adults. By taking the children seriously, the group of artists allow the children to participate in their "craft" and greater experience of life. Instead of play-acting encountered in many children's theatres, with the aim of imparting of moral values and specific meanings, the result is a play that unfolds its particular explosive power in the recognition of the underlying structural inequality between the adult and the child. The relationship between the child and the adult is neither levelled out nor resolved nor fixed in its deviation, but is kept alive – not least for the children and youngsters themselves on their way to adulthood, i.e. towards a future self, the development of which can be known neither by they themselves nor by adults.

Furthermore, working with and through media – both as a research tool and as a medium for experiences with oneself (and experiencing oneself as another person) – opens up new ways of dealing with and investigating medial practices (cf. Westphal & Jörissen 2013; Westphal 2013; 2015). The investigation of differences in written, video and aural media spaces is experienced as an intertwining, crisscrossing relationship from a range of different perspectives and employing different nuances. As such, it would seem to be, as indicated above, a future-oriented project for accompanying children – in their experience of themselves, others and the world – on their way to adulthood in the experimental sense of a "self-empowerment" or "creating oneself" in a future that appears confusing.

In the example outlined here, the notion of "self-empowerment" is not reflected upon from a purely theoretical position. Rather, the starting point is a performance practice creating an event and a community whose peculiar experiences are described by considering the *theatre as a site of self-empowerment*. At the beginning, we presented performance pieces such as those of Tim Etchells, where two actors (following the classical model of antiquity) step out of the group and directly address the audience. In contrast to this is the experimental piece by LIGNA with an open space and an audio and textual space and, by means of instructions requiring action, itself prompts *response*-ible participation in what is taking place. And finally, in the example of Gob Squad, we examined a configuration that not only reverses the traditional relationship between the generations, but also signifies a self-mirroring style of acting where the theatre acts becomes a site for children, where they can elaborate upon fantasies of self-empowerment. All three examples deal, in different ways, with the subject of relationship with the self. Thus our perspective is directed less towards holding onto concepts and more to the "presentness" that comes into being or emerges between the child and the adult, the production and its reception, the actor and the spectator.

Translated by Stuart Amor

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