

"I try to speak about reality"

Rimini Protokoll in Interview with Patrice Blaser

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Patrice: I have noticed a sentence that could apply very well to your work. The priest, whom you invited in your *Midnight Special Agency* in Brussels said, introducing himself with a single sentence: "I try to speak about reality." It means that precisely a priest tries to speak – about faith – as reality. Probably each of you could say exactly the same. Where does this addiction to show reality come from?

Helgard: The background of the priest's sentence is the fact that, for more than two years, he used his church, which he could have used to transmit his subject matter to the congregation in an abstract way, in a very concrete way, namely to accommodate around 250 Sans-papiers. He not only spoke about reality, he very concretely led the reality into that space. Of course, you can preach or you can perform pieces in which you find very important and sharp thoughts or exemplary definitions, and that is at a certain level helpful and good – on the other side, you can try to link the items to people and act upon the reality in a more concrete way, and introduce reality as dynamite into such a space.

Stefan: We are sitting here in the Kasino, a branch of Burgtheater in Vienna. If one looks how thick the walls are here, how many ornaments hang from the ceiling, then we can see that it is, just like a church, a highly representative space, which comforts people...

Helgard: ... enriches them...

Stefan: ... reproduces them. But these spaces can also be used as a sort of plinth for things and people that one is no longer accustomed to perceive.

Patrice: That's my impression, too, but you don't want to give comfort, your interest in reality lies in the deep mistrust you feel about it. About the fact that all of what presents itself as reality, can not possibly be real. That's what you expressed in your production *Sonde Hannover*. If one looks at the city from a city-tower, from the tenth floor, the city presents itself to the visitor as a theatre set and, while the gaze is guided above the earphones, this creates, in a way, a second, acoustic space, one believes that what one sees is always reality. You believe that at first. But, soon one notices that perhaps – in one place or another – not everything is entirely as one thought. One gets the feeling that this precise focussing is meant to draw attention to something that has remained hidden below the surface. In *Sonde Hannover*, you placed the spectator in a theatrical situation and this fact alone causes the reality to be perceived in a completely different way.

Helgard: The reality is being condensed and concentrated. Considering the brutality of the experimental arrangement of *Sonde-Hannover*, it is in fact how close you can get to a stranger by observing him through binoculars. Or by listening to the conversation of a completely unknown passer-by – without him knowing

it. Or how seriously and persistently can I pursue the question – for example, in *Deadline* – what happens to this man when he dies?

Daniel: At the same time, in *Sonde Hannover* it belongs to the performance setting to present some sort of reality from a perspective and to assimilate it, a perspective that is technically altered: you are above and you look down – one of the very first innovations of the police state. The cities used to be surrounded by walls and these walls did not merely offer protection, but an overview in both directions, the position of streets was created considering the view from the observation towers. The second technical deconstruction is the binoculars – the fact that you can get close to what you are looking at from a distance. One of the first experiences during our work on *Sonde Hannover* was that the gaze through the binoculars makes people seem suspicious. That is perhaps a form of negative *mise en scène*. It's the way you look through the binoculars that creates the suspiciousness. There is an architectural distance to a person, through the tower, that gets abolished because of the binoculars and the spectator becomes powerful by that gaze and begins to invent stories. This is the perspective of the surveillance camera. It was great fun for everybody to observe people closely, to be a voyeur, knowing that they cannot see you.

Patrice: On the one hand, there is the panoptical gaze, on the other this fun of having "God's" eye view. Man has always wanted to look down at the world from the bird's perspective. Why do you find it so interesting to guide the attention of people so much towards reality?

Stefan: An important point is that we hardly ever work with actors. That creates the feeling for the spectator that all that he has discovered, he has discovered for himself. Of course, he notices that we have chosen the setting by choosing the performer or the window. But while the voice guides your eyes towards the dentist's office in the third floor, where at that moment somebody is having his tooth operated on, you always have the possibility to discover something totally different in another window.

Patrice: Regarding the projects that take place in theatre-spaces, one could also say that it is all about drawing attention to other aspects of reality. In Aby Warburg's words, it is perhaps *about penetrating into the hidden chambers of soul documents*. By suddenly discovering something that has always been there, but remained unnoticed in everyday life, and is made visible only now, with the help of that special gaze that one has when one observes in an art-context.

Stefan: Our performers stand on the stage - in their function as funeral masters, lawyers or inventors of a crematorium – because they have something to say. Not because they are driven on the stage by their acting career, money, or narcissism. They don't want to show how good they are in doing something, but WHAT they do and know. Thus, as a spectator, you are always left with the freedom of discovering in these people something new, while they sprawl in front of you.

Patrice: ... which means that *Sonde Hannover* signifies rather a sort of 'opening up' – in Lehmann's sense – where unforeseen surprises can happen. In *Deadline*, it's more about transferring 'real people' on stage, with all the problems that this can create, it becomes some sort of a *mise en scène*, which is unreal to a certain extent.

Behind the façade of reality, there are other realities. The city has again and again been rediscovered by means of technical viewing – via photography and filming. At the beginning of the twentieth century, one experienced acceleration of life, but technical visual media could either make this evasive world repetitive – through film - or freeze and arrest it in photography, thus making it readable.

Helgard: On the other hand, it is precisely one of the fascinating points in the Hannover piece that there are repetitions in reality, that the place stages itself every day all by itself: the woman that passed with her shopping bag from left to right yesterday, today has perhaps brown hair and tomorrow might be blond and curly, but her role is cast very similarly.

Patrice: Still, as yet the unforeseen is given a very large frame here, while in *Deadline* the bodice of the *mis en scène* is tightened very fast.

Stefan: There are incalculable factors. The experimental arrangement on stage has a sort of openness that would be difficult to achieve with actors. The audience first of all sees 4-6 biographies. Why they have developed this attitude towards death, for example, is still under a large question mark...

Daniel: One can also describe this theatre as a blackbox (the machine that protocols flight movements). A blackbox is something in which you put something and then something comes out, but what happened inside, *how* the output was produced, that you don't know. In the same way, we put things into such a piece, which we develop together with the people according to the protocol regulations we develop with them. But it is not important to define the output; we care only about the protocol, which can be a regulation (how states are supposed to communicate) or a record (what the presidents were saying). If the participants ask us during the rehearsal what is supposed to be the message of the piece, we mostly give them an intentionally long and stupid stare and say nothing, or we say that it will remain open. In this sense, the blackbox is a state that makes the theatre constellation of audience space and stage productive; you make a protocol and a programme for everything, but not for the output. These people come with their own texts after all...

Patrice: In this case people are very strongly integrated in the process of production – precisely as regards their text – since they basically tell their own lives. There I find a link to a project like *Sonde Hannover*, namely that, through the storytelling of people, evidently more comes out than that which you alone would have been able to invent. So without them wanting it, something begins to show – analogous to Hanover, where more comes out with the coincidence of passers-by than that which you as "creators" have thought of. You are rather some sort of seekers – perhaps finders – and then you

somehow put it together. How is it possible to bring these people on stage without them starting to act? How does this transformation process of reality, or particles of reality, function without too many changes?

Daniel: A parallel between *Sonde Hannover* and *Deadline* is that the experimental arrangement changes the observed object very strongly, but not substantially. Probably physicists would say the same; otherwise, their experiments would be merely self-referential. When you step upon the stage with these five people, totally privately – which functions technically, since there are no spectators, only the working light is on, there is no rehearsal yet – then much of that threatening tension that one should somehow behave as on stage, in a technical sense, is simply not there. One can indeed be totally “normal” on these boards. But then, as soon as the spectators come in, or with the rehearsal signal, when the lights go on, there appears this problem of self-representation. It is like when you are sitting in front of a camera and having your portrait made, and then you suddenly notice: you are not the same as two minutes ago, you keep changing while this photographer is fumbling behind that black box. You begin to invent yourself anew. And this slight shift does not occur only on stage, but also within the gaze of the spectator in *Sonde Hannover* – only, in this case, the protagonist down on the street is far, far less affected, he knows nothing about the whole thing – you, who are watching, are far more confronted with the fact that you are changing what is happening down there, by the act of watching.

Patrice: So there is a shift also if one plays oneself?

Daniel: Yes, there is this transformation...

Helgard: ... because you think of the spectator...

Daniel: ... the audience is a mega-camera with many eyes.

Patrice: Is it not the same when I speak about myself just like that and when I speak about myself on stage?

Helgard and Daniel: That's not the same.

Patrice: What does it tell about theatre?

Daniel: For *Zeugen! Ein Strafkammerspiel* we've worked with two actors. They were to report on themselves at the rehearsals: they had been researching, observing processes at criminal courts, and now they stepped onto the stage and wanted to say what they had seen and experienced there. What is crazy is that these people, who have acquired acting techniques, are no longer capable of behaving on the stage in such a way that you would believe a thing of what they are saying! You immediately take it for literature! And they suffer from it. You think the text comes from Kleist. The two of them noticed that they actually, first of all, should work against everything they had learned. And from that point of view I do believe that those words, which a mayor like Hans-Dieter Ilgner says about himself in *Deadline*, are much closer to it, since you already consider that the “I”, which he says to himself, is his own, and this is not the case with an actor. This “I” is for us the stronger among the theatre fictions and also the more theatrical one. If our protagonists already have theatre experience, it is rather a handicap. We

organise the pieces in such a way that they can stay 'themselves' as much as possible, that they do not get completely twisted by the medium. Otherwise it would be lay people after all, and not the experts, to whom we want to give space.

Helgard: In order to describe the way we work, we often say "imagine it as a documentary film..." – then all the people say "aha" – "but on stage instead of the screen." And that is of course absurd, since when one thinks of a documentary, one imagines a team that remains totally in the background and almost imperceptibly skims off the reality, then rushes off to the studio and cuts it down to a few minutes. As for us, after we have "skimmed it off" together with all the concerned, we must bring it into a form that can be repeated, but in such a way that it loses nothing, if possible, of its liveliness or its degree of reality.

Stefan: Of course, these people do not pretend on stage to be walking over the Kröpcke Square in Hanover with nobody looking at them. These are all people that "perform" in their own lives. They are some kind of spokesmen for themselves. We always seek forms of life that have a certain performative value: a funeral ceremony, a court process, a parliament session...

Patrice: Recent theories about documentaries claim that there is no difference between a documentary and a fiction film. There is a pre-film reality, which cannot be achieved on film. Therefore, what is transmitted through the medium as reality is always a constructed reality, however authentic it might seem in its pose.

Helgard: There is not only a pre-film reality, but also probably something like a "pre-witnessed" reality, since it is eventually all the same whether I sit there with a camera and a microphone or experience the situation as a spectator. Therefore, the fact that you, when you are being watched, think at the same time what the one that watches you sees – regardless whether he records it on a medium or not – the witness changes your being. Naturally you gaze through the eyes of the spectator and you wonder what he might see.

Daniel: I am a fan of the Barthesian reading, namely that, at a certain point, something sings through the medium; that there is something in images, even though they are so technical, a point where something, so to say, touches you theatrically – a *punctum*. Now, whether that is "authentic" or not, I don't care. This debate on "authenticity" actually has more than two crutches to limp on, since it always tries to say something useful, which is simply too far away from anything. Often there are spectators who decide at one point to consider all that they are told about our so-called "real people" as complete fiction – precisely in *Zeugen!*, where the actress Franziska Henschel plays a "real person" under cover, the court sketcher Constanza Schargan. But at the same time, there is something that makes these stories interesting, not as well-constructed plots, but as something that one begins to *believe* or one simply wants to know, one is indeed interested in them referentially – that's the documentary in the sense of a testimony, which points to something that functions or has happened somewhere else.

Stefan: In theatre, there is a certain thinking mechanism which makes you think: how did all of them manage to agree about these people up there being ready to say "I" in this way to themselves – or even to something that they are not themselves at all. There is someone saying "I" on stage, and he is not paid for it as an actor. Before him, you as a spectator are responsible in a way that you would never be responsible watching TV. It strikes you personally when the nurse on stage tells you that she has already considered in great detail how she will look once she is dead...

Patrice: But how aware must I be of the fact that it is a nurse in order to know that she does not act as a performer - that is, *aesthetically*?

Daniel: But...

Stefan: That would be...

Helgard: Does it mean that you...

Patrice: In theatre, one expects that they act *aesthetically*. How can you avoid it, how can you make the spectator not read it *aesthetically*? Someone might say, wow, these are great actors, they are doing this understatement thing so great...

Helgard: But they would have to be unbelievably good actors...

Patrice: Let us presume they exist: where would be the shift then? You start from the presumption that reality can be brought onto the stage and also be recognised as such.

Stefan: Why should we look for such actors if we have people who tell us their stories? What draws us away from actors is the fact that they would never bring us across such stories...

Helgard: It does not draw us away; it simply does not draw us to them.

Patrice: ... you could never think of such things as you get to know through your performers.

Stefan: One could perhaps do a good research, then write a play and put it on stage with actors – but why should one do it?

Helgard: It would be worse.

Stefan: Only because the machinery of acting schools produces such an amount of actors every year, it does not mean that one has to find jobs for all by making them tell other people's stories as these people can do it themselves...

Helgard: ... and are willing to do it. Alida – the apprentice in human medicine from the *Deadline* – once had a very disconcerting thought during a public debate, she asked herself: why should she tell all these people, whom she can hardly see, since she is blinded by spotlights, why should she tell them her story? But then she immediately found reasons to do it, since it's productive for her as well to think about the things she says on stage.

Daniel: The gaze that you bring with yourself to the theatre is formed in such a way that you compensate a lot with your attitude of expectation. Our work takes advantage of a medium that has been relying on representation for the past few centuries. The theatre is truly a place where the one who says "I" frankly

doesn't mean the person who was sitting in the dressing room. And then there came performance art which was important for us.

Patrice: In *Deadline*, there are also things that are simulated and somehow 'acted': the graveyard singer, for example, which in the Vienna version receives a new welcome with each change of setting... this, for example, in a way blurs the fact that they are themselves and not acting...

Daniel: ... but that is always covertly there and the question is, how do we deal with it? How do we use it in order to make it readable in a theatre space? It is directed and produced after all!

Stefan: Especially since he tells how he is used to sitting behind the audience at funerals and sings into their backs, as if he were a CD – in Austria, where CDs are actually forbidden at funerals. He comes from sort of a theatre. And he is this sort of somewhat awkward, clumsy choir-leader type, who behaves moderately and piously at funerals in order to act as a projection board for other people's mourning: He has this weird way of standing there with his hand in his pocket and that sad look in his eyes. It is acted! But most people talk after the piece about death and not about acting: They *speak about reality*. And not about "how to make this reality".

Patrice: ... that is why, after yesterday's performance, I did not speak in the first place about the formal aspects, but rather about death and about the facts that you present there. One really gets a mirror set before one's face, since you show us our own way of dealing with death and the fact that it is far from being over after you die – if I only think of that dioxin in our ashes...

Daniel: ... of the fact that we are toxic waste. We use the theatre for something that makes more sense than "Penthesilea No. 98", even if it is probably justified in its existence – we do not want to do it. Maybe it is useful to make something, which is constantly happening in the world in which we live, accessible and the stage makes it disconcerting and one watches how that happens.

Patrice: That is the point: the theatre is a semantic space; it makes everything become a sign.

Daniel: Yeah, sure, can't be avoided.

Patrice: No, can't be avoided...

Daniel: ...even then when someone falls down on stage and *really* faints. We have often thought about that: is it possible to measure the time interval that the audience needs to switch from the theatrical reality, from something being shown to them, to the reality in which this space of signs, this as-if, this showing gets broken, to the fact that someone has indeed died, fallen, fainted, etc. Stefan has experienced such a situation recently, there was a woman fainting on stage, it lasted, I believe, two minutes, as you estimated...

Stefan: No, it was less. It was fifteen seconds or something like that, until our film was torn, until the audience reacted. But then it was all turned over again, since the stage manager immediately jumped on the stage and said: You will get your tickets back. And she was so quick and so hysterical that a part of the audience again thought it was part of the performance.

But theatre begins much earlier, with our research. Today, we were researching for our new piece here in Vienna, at the OPEC: we interviewed the spokesman about the theatre of his diplomacy – and we exchanged interested and astonished looks – without actually understanding what we thought of each other.

Patrice: You practice some sort of collecting of traces that are actually hardly visible and only become so through your activity. In a way, you fetch it into the archive in the Groszian sense. If one views theatre as an archive of cultural values, then something can be made visible only by snatching it out of the profane space. And indeed, one looks in a different way after such an evening – for example, upon death.

Your works have again and again been characterised as “theatre ready-mades”. And the interesting thing about the ready-made is that it takes familiar things and squeezes another meaning out of them. Which is then somehow “too sharp”. One has discovered with the photography of the 20s that the most suspenseful is the most real. There is a sort of overaccuracy there. The more unadjusted, the more unmediated you show reality, the more surreal and supernatural and horrifying it will appear. And that is the effect that regularly overwhelms one in your pieces. It is the fact that what you see seizes you totally and this gets creepy.

Daniel: In *Deutschland 2*, there was something like a ready-made. The project consisted in the idea that the text (of Bundestag politicians) was given word by word, but only at the very moment, simultaneously, from the original location in Berlin.

Patrice: How much time passed in between?

Daniel: Only as much as the lines needed to transport the tone from Berlin to Bonn, it was counted in milliseconds –

Patrice: Almost ‘real time’.

Daniel: Yes. One could then see the citizens of Bonn, people, voters, as they stood there in that improvised imitation of parliament. And they spoke out what was at that moment said in Berlin. It was already a few milliseconds in the past and they repeated it. Actually, it meant speaking simultaneously. And some of these representatives of people’s representatives even managed to overtake their original speakers, since it was clear how the sentence would end.

Patrice: Apart from the priest’s “I try to speak about reality”, there was another nice sentence in Brussels, which one could, by all means misunderstandingly, apply to *Deutschland 2* – that of the simultaneous interpreter, who says: “my theatre excludes my own opinion”. I think it’s excellent. It is precisely this directness that I find so wonderful in this project – the fact that people speak out a text that they can no longer shape and that this makes the stupidity of the words that they repeat even more evident.

Daniel: Precisely: this performance lasted just as long as the original session, that is, from 8:30 a.m. until quarter to one in the night, and you could enter as a spectator, see how it functions and, depending on how good the representatives of people’s representatives were, you could even get almost

1:1 what was spoken in Berlin; and it turned out that this text does not really win by its length and that it ceases to be interesting in its length by the mere fact that is spoken out by different persons. What was important was the action – the try-out. That was the attraction, not the original or its perfect copy.

Patrice: You must make it convincing for people why is it possibly right to do such a thing. How do you argue there?

Stefan: The two hundred people that were willing to copy politicians in *Deutschland 2* did so because they felt personally related to them. Or exactly because they didn't feel related to them anymore, but felt a desire to jump into the politicians roles and into their voices.

Patrice: Concerning *Deutschland 2*, I would also say that there was a need to represent the people's representatives for a change. That is somehow logical, but there are other projects in which you make people talk about that, which is everyday life for them, in another context.

Helgard: In the first place, we have many concrete questions for them. We ask them about their reality, their lives. And the fact that they answer to our advertisement, or turn up in another way, means that they also ascribe certain value to their experiences. They also have the feeling that they had something to say. Even the head cashier selling tickets, whom we won over here in Vienna, and whom we had a hard time to persuade to do it, with whom we really had to use strong arguments in order to bring him onto the stage, he also knows what he *is* after twenty years in that job, since he can look back on something. You certainly couldn't call that nothing. And the next step is to say: now we begin with rehearsals and we meet, two days before the opening night, and then so and so many people will watch us - that is a step that we make together with them. It is not something that we have to explain to them, it gets transmitted because we do not cease to ask questions and because they find it exciting to imagine: what is the actual end result of all that?

Stefan: That is as if a painter asked somebody whether he may portray him or her and that person comes again and again to the studio and sits down; and at a certain point the painting is ready, but the portrayed person would like to stay just sitting there, since he or she has got so used to the studio that the painting itself has become superfluous.

Patrice: Once a critic reproached Matisse, saying that the picture he was painting had no similarity whatsoever with the woman that it was supposed to depict. And Matisse answered the critic, "but I am not painting the woman at all, I am painting a picture."

Daniel: That's it.

Patrice: You are always looking for projects – in *Deadline* it is very evident and also *Deutschland 2* functions that way – in which aspects of reality have a central role. Now, one could agree that culture essentially originates from ritual and that one of the most important rituals is dealing with death, the expulsion of evil spirits, and that is perhaps the reason why *Deadline* shows its origin from

theatre, which is possibly given by the genealogy from art. The politicians of *Deutschland 2* are a slightly more complicated case. One cannot say what is the point; one must act "as if" one knew what to do, as if one had a recipe, as if one still had the power to act. And still: you search reality for its theatrical potential, that is, for all those places where one can find theatre.

Daniel: Yes, for the remnants. We have just made a discovery of a place where theatre is a stabiliser for common life: In court, in which the state power has diagnosed a disorder and is about to establish order symbolically, by passing a sentence on someone – that is admittedly no longer symbolic, but rather pragmatic; but in order to perform this act, a manifest theatre setting is kept and used. That is rather a pragmatic remnant, a relic, a fallout of an old theatre culture, which has penetrated into such centres of social activity. One always uses it precisely there where there is a need of closing an imaginary or threatening crack – for example, in the representation of the "will of the electorate" and power, or at funerals...

Stefan: That was the beautiful thing about *Kunsten Festival des Arts*, where we invited 23 people to speak for 5 minutes about the role that they played in their city as a stage. We have come across some very bizarre people, but we have found in every single person a point in which he or she invented signs and thus performed theatre: with the Alzheimer-nurse, it was the fact that she sang the same songs every day with her patients, who can not remember that they sang the same ones as yesterday, and with the traffic policeman it was how he organised the way in which he should give signals in order to prevent the entire moving city from breaking down...