

# UNFRIENDLY TAKEOVER

**Pirkko Husemann**

**„The Absent Presence of Artistic Working Processes.  
The Lecture as Format of Performance.“**

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(English version, (Update March 2005))

**// Part 1: let sheets of paper slide down on the floor when finished reading//**

Since Product of Circumstances (1999) by Xavier Le Roy there has been a boom of lecture-performances in the dance world that calls for a theoretical examination. Yet, I haven't heard of any attempts in the field of Dance or Theatre Studies. Besides Product of Circumstances we can sum up a multitude of recent works under this notion. Just to name a few I recall works like Self-Interview (2000) by Xavier Le Roy, Distanzlos (1999) and Stationen (2003) by Thomas Lehmen, Tino Sehgal's Untitled 1997-2003 (2003), Mårten Spångberg's Extra Clear Power (2003), The Last Performance (A Lecture) (2004), Jochen Roller's Perform Performing 1-3 (2002-2004), Edit Kaldor's Or Press Escape (2002), Directory (2003) by deufert+plischke and finally, Juan Dominguez' All good spies are my age (2002) and How heavy are my thoughts (2003) by Ivana Müller. All these performances are lectures in the multiple sense of the word: spoken or written texts that are to be listened to or to be read by an audience. How come that so many young directors and choreographers chose to present lecture-performances in the last couple of years?

This almost inflationary accumulation of lecture-performances coincides with a growing tendency to self-reflexivity in performing arts. Inspired and activated by a scepticism of the market's dominating commercially-oriented production and presentation forms, more and more performing artists have set themselves in search of other ways of working, striving the way to (re)discover new or forgotten concepts of staging and perception, and aiming to use these forms as part of a critical practice. This self-reflective form of artistic practice questions the doings of one's own and the conditions of these doings, conditions in this case meaning the predominant ways of producing and receiving. This critical practice is formulated as a resistance against taken-for-granted practices, expectations, opinions and institutions, in order to bring to light the potential of one's own field of work and influence, a potential yet unknown or forgotten. The goal of this critical plan of action is to change, from the inside out, dance and theatre's *dispositif* of representation by using this field's already inherent possibilities, in other words, to change the function through use.

One effect of the more progressively visible internal reflection upon the artistic process is an exhibition or a presentation of one's own work. Today, the process of work stands more and more within the centre of interest in place of its result. The work, which is normally confined to the studio, becomes staged as presentation (and not as rehearsal or work-in-progress), ultimately exhibiting the process of the work through the process of presentation. In relation to this, artistic self-definition and forms of presentation undergo change. The choreographer/director does not function primarily as the author of a work. Instead, s/he becomes an initiator, mediator and researcher, who questions the conditions of her/his own work and shares these reflections with the audience, as part of a collective of acting individuals (not only executing

dancers) who are self-directed. Despite criticism, some choreographers define this artistic research explicitly within the dance context because it still gives the frame and primary point of reference for their work. Some prefer the always-in-formulation contexts of choreography, theatre or performance, and then again, others define through the practice of questioning, seeking and researching. In relation to this, decreasingly standardized and increasingly open situations, open in the sense of time and space, are formed onsite, integrating the audience absolutely into the artistic happening rather than allowing the audience to simply take part in a performance for a limited time. More or less finished creations in a full-length format are replaced by long-term projects, durational performances, series and reworks or (semi-)official formats between science and theatre, theory and practice like for example laboratories, workshops, symposiums, or lectures – which brings us back to the lecture-performance. It is an interesting format, which connects theatre practice and theory, performance and discourse in a convincing way. It is compatible with both, theatre and science and offers the opportunity to reflect on artistic working processes, which usually have their place off-stage by making them a subject on stage. At the same time it is an artistic statement for not knowing. Using the lecture as an academic format of teaching and transmitting knowledge in the form of a performance turns it into a clever and playful comment on our society of knowledge. The lecture-performance features a kind of not knowing, which belongs to an order that has nothing to do with the order of knowledge. A not knowing, which does not represent a lack, which is not obscure, ignorant, or non-scientific but which produces an event beyond knowledge.<sup>1</sup> **//Action 1: distribute paper with key words//**

**L**ATENCY

**E**VENT

**C**IRCUMSTANCES

**T**OPIC

**U**TTERANCE

**R**EALISATION

**E**VIDENCE

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**P**ROCESS

**E**XPERIMENT

**R**EFLECTION

**F**ORM

**O**RIENTATION

**R**ELATION

**M**ONTAGE

**A**BSENCE

**N**ONSENSE

**C**HANCE

**E**ND

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<sup>1</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Une certaine possibilité impossible de dire l'événement*, in: Alexis Nouss (Ed.), *Dire l'événement, est-ce possible? Séminaire autour de J. Derrida (avec J. Derrida et G. Soussana)*, Paris 2001, pp. 79-112, translation P.H.

What does all this mean for theory and critique? How can I, as a researcher relate to it? Can I accept this claim for an artistic production of non-knowledge and integrate it into my academic production of knowledge? Inspired by a 12hour Marathon Lexicon, which was presented in the frame of the Forced Entertainment portrait at Mousonturm in Frankfurt in November 2003, I decided to irritate my own proceeding in writing a lecture. In this durational performance, four members of the group read texts written by artists and theorists on certain notions in alphabetical order. This gave me the idea to challenge myself by structuring my lecture on lecture-performances with the help of a lexical and aleatoric principle. So I took an English dictionary, looked for notions that have something to do with the topic lecture-performance and whose first letters compose the word lecture-performance. Besides, I wanted to represent the works I will talk about not only in videos but by quoting certain ideas, gestures and situations to talk with them (instead of only talking about them). I first did this in January 2004 in German for a lecture held at Tanzquartier in Vienna (Austria) in the frame of the lecture series ob?scene on visibility and invisibility in dance and it seems that it worked quite well<sup>2</sup>.

**// Part 2: continue to let sheets slide down on the floor, start to read cards with keywords and put them on a pile under the camera so that the words can be read //**

#### LATENCY

I start with the letter L and the notion latency. Something is latent when it is existent but has not or not yet appeared. This is also due to the work in the lecture-performance: working processes, methods, strategies and tactics are absent because they took place before the performance started and at the same time they are very present because they appear in the lecture on the level of spoken or written text. Thus, the hidden becomes audible and visible and can be experienced and yet it withdraws because it gives itself not as a real presence in the present but rather as a possible past. In relation to this, the performers' bodies like to hide behind the stories they present. They are actually present on stage but escape the view because the audience is less concentrated on the mostly unspectacular action on stage than on an imaginary reality that takes shape in front of their inner eye and attracts their full attention. So the present absence of work coincides with an absent presence of bodies. This paradoxical trait of a double ab- and presence situates the lecture-performance twice in the context of obscenity in the sense of an invisible scenic presence. In contrast to the usually over-exhausted visibility of bodies in dance and performance the lecture-performance brings them to the edges of possibility by making them seemingly disappear, while the true spectacle happens in the imaginary and therefore becomes even more interesting.

#### EVENT

So there is nothing that simply is or is not, but only the possible on the level of narration. Thus, the lecture-performance as performance becomes a field for possible bodies, possible images, possible encounters and possible events. In short, for something "that shows (itself), gives (itself) yet before something is

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<sup>2</sup> The script of the German lecture will be published in: Sonderheft der Zeitschrift Maske und Kothurn, Institut für Theater-, Film- und Medienwissenschaft (Ed.), Heft 1, Wien May 2005

certified or identified 'as' something."<sup>3</sup> What arises is a "turning point of relation"<sup>4</sup> as Dieter Mersch has called the reversal of desire in romantic poetry. Arts no longer flows from artist to recipient, but on the contrary, flows from the recipient, meaning the presence of the other (in the case of theatre the presence of the viewer) forces the artist to answer. The viewers thus take on a responsibility for the given situation, which would not even emerge if they were not present. In addition, the perception of the viewer adopts an introspective dimension, as the viewer in the face of the reflexivity of the performance is thrown back into his/her own perception. Just as the directors and choreographers question their own doings, the audience questions its own perception. In an ideal case, this results in a shared meta-reflection on the common thought movements evoked by the event on stage. This two-sided self-reflexivity locks production and reception together as accomplices into one relationship, in that both sides take part simultaneously and sometimes of equal measure in the production of sense and knowledge.

### CIRCUMSTANCES

In any case it should not be neglected that this complicity in self-reflexivity is always already a product of circumstances, a result of a critical attitude towards the predominant modes of production and reception. So the writing about or performing of artistic working processes necessarily includes an investigation of circumstances and difficulties of work and calls for a display of its obstacles, inherent paradoxes and possibly even of its failure. This means on the one hand the social, cultural, personal and political context of the theatre makers, on the other hand the outline of the concept, the finances, the selection of participants and methods, the transposition of the concept into practice, the choice or development of possible formats of presentation and the way of how to deal with critique and theory. In his Self-Interview that had been presented in the frame of E.X.T.E.N.S.I.O.N.S. Xavier Le Roy for example gives a short overview of the project series' development to mark his work explicitly as a product of circumstances. His report covers the application for financial support at the Senat für Kultur, Forschung und Wissenschaft der Stadt Berlin, he mentions the letter to 20 friends and colleagues in which he invited them to participate in the project and he recalls his problematic position as initiator of the project in confrontation with the collective joined for his initiative.<sup>5</sup> It is, by the way, striking that Le Roy marks references to theoretical texts by Isabelle Stengers, Elisabeth Grosz, Deleuze and Spinoza, Michel Bernard, Lacan, Michel Caillois and Yvonne Rainer with an explicit „Thank you!“, but that he does not mention the existing (and for him very familiar) format model provided by Yvonne Rainer's Continuous Project – Altered Daily (1970). Whoever saw Product of Circumstances before, and therefore knows that Le Roy had investigated Rainer's *project in progress* thoroughly during the work with Quatuor Albrecht Knust, can discover astonishing parallels. It is regrettable, that he leaves out this important reference in Self-Interview and it might enhance the supposition, that he does not consider her artistic, but very cerebral work as a sufficient legitimation in comparison with the renowned theorists.

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<sup>3</sup> Dieter Mersch, Ereignis und Aura. Untersuchungen zu einer Ästhetik des Performativen, Frankfurt/Main, 2002, p. 143

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183

<sup>5</sup> See Xavier Le Roy, Self-Interview 27.11.2000, in: Karen Knoll, Florian Malzacher (Hg.), True Truth About the Nearly Real. A Reader, Frankfurt/Main 2002, pp. 44-56

## TOPIC

So this critical practice in the format of a lecture-performance deals with itself in the broader sense of work, art and life. Therefore it might be helpful to reconsider the notion of art in the context of work.<sup>6</sup> It is only since renaissance that artistic occupation was at all considered as work. Still the work of a craftsman (a painter or a sculptor who makes a product with a specific technique) has always been differentiated from the work of other producers. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the artist then became the heroic genius whose masterpiece had an aura and so art was de-connected from work. Consequently, even today artistic occupation has the appeal of an independent, isolated practice, which has generally rather disappeared in the course of industrial modernity. There were only a few attempts to understand art as work like for example in collectively working communist artist groups, or in contrast to that, in National Socialism or in the Fluxus movement of the 1960s. Interestingly, in our contemporary society where the world is split in people with and without work, the notion of work in arts has passed over from the activity of working to the product of work.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, art can be less seen as a productive contribution to meritocracy but rather as a subversive activity with a political potential. Artistic work, when it is thought radically, claims to function as a critical conscience to pinpoint our society's functioning or, more often, its failure. To understand and to live theatre as work and art in this sense means to participate in a kind of conspiracy and to act with an anarchistic, joyful, aggressive and sensual impetus. Of course, we have to be careful that such an image does not risk to be perverted into a market strategy, as it can also easily happen with the scientificness of art.

## UTTERANCE

Now I want to come back to the lecture-performance as an example for a way of staging such a political utterance. The lecture is a spoken, written or read narration. In the performance, the levels of action, space and time create a hybrid of diverse situations and states that overlap and interfere. The retrospective or sometimes also prospective story coexists with the production process of the lecture-performance and with the performance situation, which again implies the performance (that is the telling, reading or performing of a story) and its reception (that is the watching, hearing, or reading of the presented story). Often, it is impossible to differentiate between things that happened, things that might have happened, things that actually happen and things that eventually might still happen. Nevertheless, or perhaps particularly therefore, the lecture-performance offers the possibility to fix events at least temporarily, either in a chronological but arbitrary order or in an accidental chaos or in a constructed superposition. So during the performance, the viewer as the addressee of the lecture-performance is invited to put together his/her own chronicle of the events by composing his own memory of another memory conveyed by the performers. As the recipient of a spoken or written text he/she becomes a witness and perhaps even an accomplice of a possible story, which turns from a text into an event only through the act of being uttered and remembered and only for the moment of utterance and memory.

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<sup>6</sup> See Wolfgang Ullrich, *Kunst als Arbeit?*, in: Martin Hellmold, Sabine Kampmann, Ralph Lindner, Katharina Sykora (Hg.), Was ist ein Künstler. Das Subjekt der modernen Kunst, München 2003, pp. 163-176

<sup>7</sup> Even I use the term 'work' in this sense to avoid other peculiar notions like production, piece or show and I am quite aware of the fact that this might enhance an abuse of the word, but I guess you will forgive me that in our context here.

## REALISATION

As we all know, the final realisation of an artistic project is preceded by a diversity of outlines, attempts and states of development and moments of choice or rejection. Many contemporary directors and choreographers try to integrate these steps of the working process into the performance or try to make the working process itself become the performance. They do so by initiating long-term projects (like E.X.T.E.N.S.I.O.N.S./Project by Xavier Le Roy) or by organizing continuous projects (like Schreibstück or Stationen by Thomas Lehmen) or by planning works as reworks (like Thomas Plischke with B.D.C. and frankfurter küche). Their aim is not to repeatedly improve a work until it has reached its final state and to defend an unfinished work against possible critique. On the contrary, these projects call for thinking in different categories, which does not focus on the aesthetics of a full-length evening programme, but which considers the working process as an integral part or even as the essence of the performance.

## EVIDENCE

Even though the lecture-performance is indeed a standardized full-length programme for a conventional stage/auditorium setting it enables the integration of usually isolated events and states. Past moments and states of work as well as their professional and private circumstances become part of the present performance by means of evidence like image and sound documents. Compared with the memories that are mediated on the level of language or text, these objects and sources (particularly when they are explicitly introduced as such) have an even bigger suggestive appeal. Yet they give no guarantee for the stories they are supposed to verify. Though they are obviously there, they fail in their function as proofs in the context of the possible and by this question the stated power of evidence. It is this impossibility of differentiation between reality and fiction that manifests itself in a subtle presence and therefore draws the audience into the event. Like detectives they try to investigate things and stories, like participants they are tempted to experience the narrated stories and conveyed memories.

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But how is it at all possible to remember the possibly remembered and what can be remembered in this case? Since I don't want to loose myself in the realm of potentiality here I will show you two examples that might function as evidence for what I tried to explain so far. // **Action 2: read credits of AG-SAMA and show excerpt, read credits of HHAMT and show excerpt, from now on always take three cards in a row //**

## PROCESS

## EXPERIMENT

## REFLECTION

When the production process of a work becomes the subject of performance the working as a process turns into a work as a product. With the help of text cards Juan Dominguez tells us about the motivation for his project, about the organisational and conceptual preparations in the studio, about the chosen and dismissed ideas, about possible titles, scenes and performance situations. The words and sentences on the cards can be read as notes in a scratch book or diary, as instructions for acting or action, observations, memories and reflections, depending on their length and formulation. Thus, it stays unclear whether the clues for space, time and identity, which are given on the level of text, are real or fictitious. What is

clear is the fact that the production process is not only considered as a necessary state in the course of a product-oriented work but that the essence of the performance lies in the reflection on the own work. On cards 301 to 304 we read the following: „In a cafe in Berlin: Having been distracted the whole day, attracting my friends attention, we got in a heated conversation after some Caipirinhas. They gave me a talking that brought about this idea. One male friend and two female friends kept on telling me I should use my way of being as a working structure so as not to get bored and tired of things so quickly. / Days later I decide to start building up an idea with everything that I started with and have thrown away and with everything that had influenced the process until then. I mix this idea with a previous one, which I wanted to show in sheets of paper, giving them a visual rhythm, building up a choreography of words and texts. / I bought this table to show this idea. / This idea is swallowing up the others. From this one I could do the whole piece.“<sup>8</sup> And this is, what he actually did.

In HHAMT Bill Aitchison reports with the help of video documents about Ivana Müller's experimental research on the question „If my thoughts are heavier than usual, is my head heavier than usual too?“ On the screen we can follow her more or less amateurish self- and group-experiments with scales, we see interviews with thought-specialists like a psychiatrist, a philosopher and a physicist, and we see how Ivana even undergoes a medical examination in a computer tomograph, which does not bring the expected results. It stays unclear, if she really undertook all these experiments and try-outs to find out the answer to her basic question. Quickly, a repeated ironical blinking of the eye evokes a certain doubt about this version. So for example when we observe Ivana and a group of friends while they are spread all over the floor in a room, resting with their heads on scales to measure the weight of their head during heavy and light thinking. It seems much more plausible, that science and theatre are confronted here in a format of performance (the lecture-performance) that is compatible with both to focus on research and experiment as integral parts of theatre work. Not by coincidence, there is this casual remark about “artistic projects where theatre meets science and science meets theatre.“<sup>9</sup>

## **FORM**

### **ORIENTATION**

### **RELATION**

The set-up for both performances is pretty simple: just take a performer, a table, a chair, a screen and a laptop or a video camera. In the case of AGASAMA the lecture happens through the reading of the text printed on the cards, in HHAMT it is Bill's reading of the sheets of paper accompanied by the images on the screen. The performers' action is reduced to Juan piling up the cards and to Bill letting the sheets of his script slide off the table and clicking on a button on the screen of his laptop. Both performers tend to disappear on stage while functioning primarily as mediators of a story. Despite the simple set-up the clever structure of both lecture-performances provokes a kind of disorientation on the side of the viewer. The material is composed of action, image and language in the form of text and sound, on the level of space it is suspended between the space of stage and (imaginary) image and on the level of time it happens between performance time, reading or narration time and narrated story. Furthermore, the lecture repeatedly refers to the level of the story and vice versa. The attitude of the performers oscillates between factual execution, presentation of the story and representation of the persons appearing in the story. Both

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<sup>8</sup> Juan Dominguez, un-published script of AGSAMA, cards 301-304

<sup>9</sup> Bill Aitchinson in HHAMT by Ivana Müller

have one or two little actions, which make them reappear behind their stories. In AGSAMA Juan takes a little birthday candle out of his trouser pocket, which plays “Happy Birthday” when he turns it on. Towards the end of the lecture-performance one card reads “Let the show begin” and he gets up, puts on a mask and leaves the space as a 76year old man. In HHAMT there is a short scene in which the astonishingly flexible Bill gets up from his chair **//action 3: get up from the chair//** to demonstrate the path of thoughts through the body from the chest to his back until the top of his shoe **//demonstrate the path of thoughts and sit down again//**. Compared to the continuous flow of text and language these little actions are so irritating that they are almost perceived as an alien element. What is usually considered as very normal in the frame of a performance, paradoxically, seems to be completely out of place.

#### **MONTAGE**

#### **ABSENCE**

#### **NONSENSE**

Through the montage of the material, the overlapping of action, time and space levels, and through the impossibility of differentiation between reality and fiction Juan Dominguez and Ivana Müller create a calculated irritation that leaves the audience to insecurity and at the same time invites them to compose their own chronicle of the events. This complex intertwining on the level of structure is supported by a play with identities. In AGSAMA we can hardly tell who is the person speaking on the cards and who is the vis-à-vis of this unknown speaker. Besides Juan, his girlfriend, his friends, his family and the audience, there is for example Second Skin, a little man made of banana skin who fights with the flies that swarm round him on the window-sill of Juan’s studio. On cards 399/400 the following dialogue between the two of them can be read: „Now he is here with me, just like that, checking how I describe on the computer his appearance. Hey! Second Skin! Oops! He has blocked his ears. Sorry, I did not mean to shout at you. Is there anything you want to say? – To whom? / - To the audience. – Where is the audience? – It is not here but it will be. – Then should I say something now? – Because you won’t be here when they are [...]“<sup>10</sup>

In HHAMT Bill excuses Ivana’s absence with the information that she unfortunately could not be there this night and that he would replace her. So Ivana herself is absent during the lecture-performance and appears only on the screen, where she often attracts the audience’s full attention. Bill speaks of her as I.M. These are the initials of her name, but at the same time it also gives a clue on a personal union. Spoken by Bill, “I am” means that he claims to be Ivana Müller. In the end of the lecture-performance, image and theatre space and narration and performance time seem to be synchronized. On the screen we see Ivana in a handstand, trying to focus her thoughts in a silver cone hat. On stage we see Bill with the same hat on his head when he starts to speak to the image for the first time: “I.M. how are you doing?” and Ivana answers “I’m fine, thanks.“ Of course at this point nobody in the audience believes that Ivana is really somewhere next door, standing on her hands in front of a camera, trying to sort out her thoughts with the help of gravity. On the contrary, this obvious fake proof of her presence just emphasizes her absence on stage. At the same time this little trick makes the viewer again a witness of a possible event, which actually needs no evidence because Ivana wouldn’t have needed an alibi to convince us of her existence. For this it is sufficient enough to see her jumping around naked on “Wild Thing” between bewildered sheep on a meadow...

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<sup>10</sup> Juan Dominguez, un-published script of AGSAMA, cards 399/400



**// action 4: show excerpt of HHAMT //**

**C**HANCE

**E**ND

Here I don't want to miss my chance to take this moment of wild nonsense as an ending. I hope you enjoyed it. Thank you.