

Let's talk about work, honey – Attempt at a Reconstruction

By Christine Standfest

"For her three-part salon 'Let's talk about work, honey!', the choreographer Claudia Bosse invited practitioners from different artistic disciplines to joint work sessions. Choreographers meet filmmakers and dramaturges meet performers in an installative setting to examine similarities and differences between their specific working methods based on not yet completed works. The incomplete works are set in relation to each other to discuss the paradigms of contemporary art-making practice in various socio-political contexts.

Under what conditions is art produced today, or more specifically, how do the conditions of production in countries such as Germany and Austria differ from those in Egypt and Greece? Which structures must be resisted on a transnational level? And is a political moment of contemporary choreography revealed in this potential resistance?" (announcement in the Dance Congress programme)

With Kaya Behkalam (DE/EG), filmmaker, artist (in place of Doa Aly, EG)/ Claudia Bosse (DE), artist, choreographer / Anna Etteldorf (AT), project coordinator/ Ismail Fayed (EG), author, scholar (could not attend on short notice)/ Adania Shibli (PS/DE), author (in place of Tzeni Argyriou, GR)/ Filippos Tsitsopoulos (GR), artist/Arkadi Zaidis (IL), choreographer.

Why "Salon"?

I find it useful to begin with the text announcing the event and the list of participants – including those who were not able to attend and could only be partially replaced. In the text I read about a desire to lend the question pertaining to "contemporaneity" a format, a structure, in which it can be jointly developed in practical terms. Perhaps it is an almost "impossible", or also an all too complex communication and work structure that is envisioned and to be provided here, going in the direction of a potentiality. Hence, I would like to describe the salon as an attempt to merge the past (as the history of the contributed artistic practices) with the future (at issue are "uncompleted" works) in the present moment which is shared in the context of current, politically pragmatic conditions. The salon format "Let's talk about work, honey" initiated by Claudia Bosse would thus already be such an initial statement on the question of contemporaneity. It is a performative and discursive offer with the aim of uniting artistic action and the reflection on its conditions and consequences, as well as on its potential to effect change – not least to shift the problematic opposition between action and reflection towards engagement, controversy and participation.

Claudia Bosse, choreographer, artist and artistic director of theatercombinat, trained in theatre direction at the Hochschule für Schauspielkunst Ernst Busch Berlin, has been working in the fields of (spatial) choreography, (choric) theatre and urban intervention since the mid-1990s. She creates international installations and works for museums, architectures and theatre as well as urban spaces, and teaches, publishes and initiates research projects. She has been collaborating for long periods of time with artists and theorists of various genres, most recently in Cairo, Athens and elsewhere.

The series "Let's talk about work, honey" has existed since 2014. The format is grasped as a "transdisciplinary salon about working methods by artists and other practitioners: which formats are possible to present artistic fragments, to talk and to discuss about methods of work, where the outcome is still uncertain? it's about outlining the interests and to sketch the blind spots of the own method. 2 different working methods are therefore presented in a self-determined experimental format on one evening. objects, performative fragments, projections, sound etc."¹

"Let's talk about work, honey" at the Dance Congress 2016 is the twelfth salon of the series. The participants are a choreographer and dancer (Arkadi Zaides), a visual artist also working with performance (Filippos Tsitsopoulos), a writer (Adania Shibli), a theatre director operating in the field of choreography (Claudia Bosse) and a filmmaker also active in visual art (Kaya Behkalam). Claudia Bosse's invitation practice reflects encounters at places and in contexts to where her artistic work has led her in recent years, among others, Vienna, Berlin, Cairo and Athens. Filippos Tsitsopoulos was suggested by the Athens-based choreographer Tzeni Argyriou, who like the Egyptian artist Doa Aly and the writer, dramaturg and theorist Ismael Fayed from Cairo could not attend – the latter two because of visa difficulties.²

The concrete consequence of these restrictions of mobility for the salon at the Dance Congress was that the preparation for all participants (including the Congress organisers and the invited artists) was repeatedly "toppled", and that the current political situation in Europe contributed to the choreography of the course of the event, so to speak. As is known, inequalities in regard to mobility and freedom of travel defined by the economy and the (nation-)state lead to massive and in part tragic consequences for artistic collaboration, especially "contemporary" collaboration that is allegedly global and transnational. But they are seldom sufficiently reflected upon. Some of these aspects were addressed in the contribution by the Palestinian writer Adiana Shibli living in Jerusalem and Berlin using the example of movement and mobility in literature.³ The first day of the salon was generally shaped by questions of

¹ <http://theatercombinat.com/projekte/lets%20talk%20about%20work,%20honey!/projekt.htm>, last accessed on 20 July, 2016

² Due to this changes only two instead of three sessions could take place

³ Interesting insights on the Western treatment of corruption to enable travelling were given in the Congress panel "Ethics of Decision Making" by Anna-Maija Mertens, CEO Transparency International Deutschland.

space, its economic, political and artistic production, as well as its effects on body and movement.⁴ The second day dealt more with time.

In the discussion on space, one of Claudia Bosse's introductory propositions, "space as crime", became an indeed controversial, crucial point. Briefly said, space as a scene of discrimination becomes a crime when mobility is criminalised through municipal and state rules and laws allegedly aimed at protecting a national identity, and when free movement of capital is placed above the value of human lives.

Let's talk about work, honey

Through a not very inviting concrete corridor, we, the participants, walk down into the theatre museum in the basement of the Schauspielhaus Hannover where we find a strangely furnished room: in the centre, loudspeakers and two beamers projecting onto opposite walls; large pieces of paper distributed in the room, some with drawings, some with writing, others empty. Carefully arranged texts lie next to grey cushions on the floor; some of the cushions are spread across the walls, fragilely supported by long wooden slats leaning against the wall. They resemble tent rods, reminiscent of makeshift shelters that can be quickly dismantled, or bars to which banners can be attached. The slats form diagonals in this low-ceilinged room with a carpeted floor and columns. They lend a rhythm to the concrete supports manifesting the steel construction and interrupt the functional geometry.

A parallel space of temporariness emerges, of easy alterability, assembled merely in an interplay of weight and gravity. Like a dance, like a choreography. It is not easy for us as guests to orient ourselves in this space with different directions. The diagonal slats at least momentarily disturb our sense of order established by verticals and horizontals. No frontal side can be distinguished. Where and how should one position oneself, sitting or standing? Or lying? Or lounging about?

The arrangement of the objects, the papers, speakers, slats, cushions and persons changes during the course of the two days. New things are added, existing things are commented on, supplemented, written or drawn on. In short: an incomplete installative setting for what is not completed, for coming together.⁵

⁴ When talk is of the "production of space" here and in the following, then in the sense of Henri Lefebvre and subsequent works on space and spatial sociology that start from the assumption that "space" is not a given, but is materially and historically constructed, and produced and updated through complex spatial routines.

⁵ A selection of photos can be found on the website of theatercombinat:
<http://theatercombinat.com/projekte/lets%20talk%20about%20work,%20honey!/projekt.htm>

*Session I – Contributions**Adania Shibli*

The scholar and author was born in Palestine in 1974 and currently lives in Jerusalem and Berlin. Her literary writings both intensively engage and break with the Arabic literary tradition. As a scholar she has dealt with the politics of seeing after 9/11 ("Visual Terror") and with contemporary Palestinian artists (in "Dispositions", Ramallah, 2012). She has also conducted research and taught as a visiting professor at, among others, the Birzeit University, Palestine.

In the basement of the Theatermuseum she starts with an illustrated tour de force through the spatial aspects in the writings of Palestinian authors. Against the frequent accusation of a "lack of movement" in the works of Palestinian writers, to whom a "genetic defect" is even ascribed, she retraces the interplay between the spatial movements of the authors and/or their characters and the political-territorial history of Palestine. At the same time, she envisions literature as a social and personal space of possibilities to intervene in these conditions.

Adania Shibli outlines a transnational cosmopolitanism that is imposed by the wide-ranging flight movements of the authors or their literary protagonists, but that is also self-determined, with alternating settings in the literature before 1948, via the restrictions of the radius of movement on Israeli territory and further reductions of the fictional or real areas of action in Gaza and the West Bank since the 1970s, all the way to an author who refuses to leave his bed. His rejection of movement becomes a political gesture in the face of the conditions exemplarily described in Ghassan Kanafani's story "Men in the Sun" from 1962, in which emigrants fleeing from Iraq suffocate in a container.

In the end we watch a video piece by the Palestinian artist Sharif Waked, "Chic Point: Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints", showing photos of Palestinian men at checkpoints regularly forced to expose themselves, contrasted by young male models wearing haute couture, whose cut-outs expose parts of their bodies. In "Chic Point", Waked confronts the forced exposure at the checkpoints with the exposure of self-chosen fashion: "(We see) men traversing the profoundly violent but highly common Israeli checkpoint. One man after another lifts shirts, robes, and jackets. Some kneel shirtless, others naked, with guns poised at their exposed flesh. 'Chic Point' brings these two locations together in a reflection on politics, power, aesthetics, the body, humiliation, surveillance, and chosen as opposed to forced nudity."⁶

⁶ <http://u-in-u.com/nafas/articles/2005/waked/>

Arkadi Zaides

The pictures of Palestinians at Israeli checkpoints implicitly establish a connection to Arkadi Zaides. The Israeli choreographer and dancer born in Belarus became known for his work "Archives" in co-operation with B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. In 2007 the organisation handed out cameras to Palestinians with the aim of documenting abuses and human rights violations in conflict zones. In "Archives", Zaides uses selected video material from which he extracts the dynamics of violence, gestures and voices, adapting and embodying them in dance in an installation and a live performance parallel to the recordings, thus turning his body into a "living archive".⁷

At the salon, Zaides now expands his investigation of borders and border regimes by a preview of his current choreographic research: "The EU-funded technology project TALOS⁸ is the focus of Israeli choreographer Arkadi Zaides' research work. The mobile robotic system is being developed to guard Europe's outer boundaries and is supposed to recognise and prevent people from illegally crossing the [European and Israeli, C.S.] borders. Zaides' production is a re-enactment of the TALOS project which takes issue with its ethical mechanisms, as well as political and economic interests."⁹ In his contribution showing one of the first video games from the 1970s (as an example of a first, playful interface) as well as footage from the TALOS project, Zaides again takes up Claudia Bosse's introductory proposition of "space as crime": To what extent do borders become potentially criminal spaces? How do territories and their protection produce crime? What can be observed is an increasing criminalisation of movement, during the course of which borders themselves become mobile. Strategies aimed at stopping movement are becoming more and more violent and at the same time technologically "refined"; political territories and their protection no longer function only statically, "telluric" and interpersonally (i.e. through fences and human executive forces), but technologically (new forms of surveillance, e.g. by means of drones controlling border regions and enabling methods of targeted selection).

What do these new forms of "post-human", no longer merely static, visual borders imply for the mobility of people and in general for our notion of the capacity to act and the construction of subjectivity? How do these borders structure movement? How do they affect the body? And with which artistic, choreographic strategies and practices can this be countered? Arkadi Zaides grasps the research in the TALOS project developed since 2007 on Polish territory as part of his expanded archive and the beginning of a new choreographic work on border regimes and their effects on movement, body and the definition of space.

⁷ <http://www.arkadizaides.com/archive>

⁸ <http://talos-border.eu>

⁹ http://bundeskulturstiftung.org/cms/en/projekte/buehne_und_bewegung/together-apart.html

Claudia Bosse

Claudia Bosse establishes a connection between the interplay of the including and excluding production of space and artistic-choreographic engagement with it in her contribution. At the same time, she outlines a dispositif of art as a space of possibility, protection and thought under the prevailing conditions. She manoeuvres between her current project series IDEAL PARADISE and a prospect of her upcoming works under the thesis of SPACE AS CRIME. In the analysis of historical configurations of spatiality, she comes upon paradise as the construction – massively inscribed in the Western-Christian mind-set – of a double inclusion and exclusion, of forbidden and allowed zones, in whose inside or outside different bans and possibilities prevail. The inside is marked as the protected, ideal, secure space. The (Christian) concept of paradise orders the own and the foreign, and contains a model of time as the abolishment of past and future – as eternal or also as eternally lost. But what happens when the rules are not followed?

In Claudia Bosse's artistic works, space and the rules of the production of space have always been "co-authors". Choreography becomes a method to (collaboratively) analyse bodies and their relations in and to spaces, which she makes concrete using the example of the series "Ideal Paradise" in Vienna: In September 2015, during the climax of flight movements to and through Austria, a place already found for the new production with theatercombinat is repurposed on the short term to accommodate refugees. As a consequence, the art production with various "Urban Laboratories" moves to urban and in part public space – rehearsals and performances take place on inner-city empty lots, in public libraries, in a launderette, or in the furniture warehouse of the Caritas.¹⁰ Temporary communities of actors from different fields are formed to experiment with orientation in a confusing time characterised by violence: protected spaces to examine history and ideology, to develop new forms of behaviour towards each other and one's surroundings. The choreographies embedded in public or different social spaces investigate and shift spatial routines through co-usage and co-presence with other users and publicly question the contingency and construction of these rules and limitations.

She then addresses the previous contributions and raises questions such as: How can contemporary art (production) grasping itself as paradigmatically deterritorialised and deterritorialising react to current developments of identitarian politics, the nation-state, old and new border regimes, and the assertion of territoriality? What does this imply for the idea of art as a space of protection and experimentation? Is it a withdrawal to secured representation? How can space as crime be analysed, understood and attacked? How can the bodies of the performers become investigative instruments of

¹⁰ http://theatercombinat.com/projekte/katastrophen/KAT_IP_stadt.htm

the production of space? Or recorders, living recording systems of border productions and shifts? And how could these actors respond to and organise themselves against the concrete regimes and technologies described by Arkadi Zaides?

Discussions

Then a discussion begins, which is quite controversial due to the diversity and density of the contributions. It revolves around the following themes¹¹: Is the proposition, yes, the judgement on space as crime not too strong? Are we sitting in judgement on space? Do all (territorial) spatial practices necessarily produce inclusions and exclusions? Is movement necessarily criminalised at the present? Or is space, especially the space of choreography, not also a playground and playing field to negotiate conflicts? Or: resistant practices – can the rejection of movement (with recourse to Adiana Shibli) be such as practice? Or is it capitulation?

The debate ultimately focuses on the interconnection of space, crime and fear. If border regimes and restrictions use fear as a figure of justification and (wilfully) produce it in the first place, what fear is then at issue? And whose fear? When we speak about envisioning (body) strategies against this spatial production of fear in choreography and art, who is meant by “we”? Against the background of rightist developments worldwide – whom does this we include and exclude? Mustn’t we first accept all kinds of fears? And about which borders are we speaking, also in the face of an epistemological shift from the idea of the interface in the 1990s to that of border control today? Don’t we need Frontex? And with which artistic strategies (of abstraction – Arkadi Zaides; of refusal – Adiana Shibli) do we convey these questions to the public? How do we develop the ability to act and actions?

And questions repeatedly arise as to the archive, also the living archive, and documents in relation to fiction, and also to intervening practices in relation to analysis and the production of different spaces. Can we initiate processes that negotiate the hatefully stirred fear of everyone against their common capitalisation?

Session II

Session II starts with comments on day one and makes recourse to the question of writing and the agency of words. Adiana Shibli rejects a return of the narrative as a grand, self-contained story which corresponds with the revitalisation of the nation-state. She instead brings methods of her own writing onto play that require long periods of time and in an interplay of production and erasure unfold a dynamics of porosity and openness, with characters that are at once stubborn and awkward. At issue is to interrupt the traumatic dialectics that through the coercion to move (flight) produces its

¹¹ Attempt at an indeed subjective summary. C.S.

criminalisation. And finally, not only space (as a forced regime) is problematic, but also the construction of time, the linear time of the self-contained narrative, for example. Adiana Shibli counters this with the consciousness and practice of “constant relatedness” as that which makes up contemporaneity and the way in which the present is treated.

Contributions

Kaya Behkalam

Kaya Behkalam, born in Berlin in 1978, is a visual artist and filmmaker. He lives and works in Berlin and Cairo, where he teaches as a visiting professor at the Institute for Visual Cultures of the American University Cairo and is co-founder of the artists’ group Reloading Images. His works have been shown internationally at, among others, the Museum Folkwang Essen, the Heidelberger Kunstverein and the House of World Cultures, Berlin.¹²

Kaya Behkalam starts with considerations on whether and how his works and methods are informed by a sense of “always coming too late”. I (C.S.) would call them seismographs of non-synchronicity; also engagements with resistant melancholy. In 1979 his family returns to Iran after the revolution, something which doesn’t last long. In 1989, while living in West Berlin directly on the border to East Berlin, he is on a school excursion when the Wall comes down and returns to a suddenly changed environment. In 2011, he is invited to Cairo, where he arrives five days after Mubarak’s fall, to witness a city “like after the end of a party”. As someone who came too late, he starts reading the traces of what is already absent. He speaks of the present-day city as an archaeological site; of excavations and the creation of acts of memory that return to us – just like a DJ guiding us through a party, when we remember the sounds ... and of melancholy (the sadness about something lost that has not yet arrived) as contemporaneity. He presents historical and current recordings from Cairo and Egypt.

In more detail, he illustrates and describes a project lasting from 2011 to 2016 that can “perhaps never be completed”. It revolves around the bust of Nefertiti, and with it the questions of looted art, tradition and ownership. The work originally planned for the museum in Cairo constantly comes upon obstacles and impossibilities. It leads from Ludwig Borchardt’s archive (the Berliner who found the bust in 1912) back to Cairo again, and finally collapses due to the stop of all projects at the Archaeological Museum Cairo, which was temporarily used as a prison and torture chamber. An initially “innocent” project becomes a highly complex one that cannot be lent a final (exhibition) form and increasingly turns into fiction. The artist himself becomes a fictive figure (like Billy Pilgrim in Kurt Vonnegut’s novel “Slaughterhouse 5”). The form of the

¹² <http://kayabehkalam.net>

project is perhaps precisely that: a collection of anecdotes. Contemporaneity expressed in a novel-like gesture that integrates the past, present and future and allows us “to see many marvellous moments all at one time”.

Filippos Tsitsopoulos

Filippos Tsitsopoulos is a painter, installation, video, theatre, performance and media artist who since 1990 has been fathoming the borders of performance and painting in the area of interactive installation art for the theatre. He lives in Athens.¹³

In parallel to the initial discussions and Kaya Behkalam’s contribution, Filippos Tsitsopoulos starts to arrange fruit and vegetable piled up in front of him and then ties them around his face and head like a sculpture reminiscent of Arcimboldo’s paintings. An initially silent performance commences that as a concrete ritual-like action establishes its own time in this room, disturbing, informing and grounding the discussions and contributions. We thus unexpectedly become spectators of a performance.

It is about the story of his father who died in 2006. The performance, in formal terms situated between happening, ritual and multimedia show, is the artist’s attempt at making contact with him. It is about invocation and fear; masks and their power; poetry and biography. The father is an actor rehearsing his texts with his son. We hear his voice reciting Tennessee Williams’ “The Glass Menagerie”, recorded on an old cassette. The voice forms the dramatic-poetic-rhythmic undercurrent of the performance, which used material, words, pictures, and sculpture to reflect on the inner, personal sources of creativity. Surrounded by video projections on three walls, recorded and live voices and the sculpturally formed, masked body, we witness – as he calls it – an “exorcism of memories” that becomes increasingly dramatic, until the mask is taken off at the end. Then silence again.

Filippos Tsitsopoulos later describes his works as attempts at “memory-as-performance” in order to share them. He succeeded in doing so.

Discussions

The second session is dedicated more to fiction, writing, the word, and narration along with their relationship to memory and contemporaneity. The focus is repeatedly on archives as orders of things and time, on methods and strategies of archiving, on memories stored as traces in the body or in objects; on how the present and contemporaneity are linked to other times; on the various perspectives on the archive (classifying) and archaeology (excavating), and the fact that contemporary artists are like translators who provide access to these other layers of time – a porous, not monolithic, but open access – against the coercion of permanent presence.

¹³ www.filippostsitsopoulos.com

Concluding remarks

During the course of the salon, there are seamless alternations between performance, presentation and discussion, partially accompanied by irritating or overtaxing, but also enriching role and position changes on the side of the guests: watching, listening, participating – an encounter of variegated presences. What remains is a controversial abundance of questions, insights and – yes: the experience of exposing oneself as a quality of encounter. We agree to disagree. In the wild superimposition of scenes, images, voices and methods in the installative setting of the salon, the perspectives of the contributors and their various scopes of action (not to mention their origins) as well as their effects on their artistic practice become comprehensible. Not relativized. The salon as a material space of speaking and thinking.

Towards the end, Kaya Behkalam brings Walter Benjamin's Angel of History into play. Literally, as a performative re-enactment, thus perhaps completing the circle back to Claudia Bosse's IDEAL PARADISE.

My wing is ready to fly
I would rather turn back
For had I stayed mortal time
I would have had little luck.
Gerhard Scholem, Angelic Greetings

"There is a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm."¹⁴

What if we were all in the position of the angel today? And would this premonition maybe lead to a "political moment in contemporary choreography"?

¹⁴ http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses_on_History.html