

How to Collaborate?

Love and Rage

Ausschnitt aus dem Briefwechsel der Performance-KünstlerInnen Claudia Heu und John Jordan über Zusammenarbeit in den Künsten und in der Welt.

Claudia Heu/John Jordan: „Love and Rage“. In: How to Collaborate? Questioning Togetherness in the Performing Arts. Hrsg. v. Silke Bake/Peter Stamer/Christel Weiler. Wien 2016, S. 76-97.

[...]

Albuquerque, 2nd October 2015

Dear John,

greetings from the arid high-altitude desert, from Albuquerque, the city of *Breaking Bad*.

This time I got my own sense of *breaking bad* in ABQ. I was taking a bus on line 66, dubbed the *prison bus* by locals, to go downtown where I work with nine performers in an old 400-square-metre apartment. I have been invited by a local performance company to restage a piece I had done in Austria in 1999. These nine people have retreated to this place for different reasons, but they have one thing in common; they can no longer function in the outside world.

Never before had I come across so many different and weird characters on public transport: drug addicts, psychopaths, people straight out of prison. In a seat opposite me, a fat woman was staring at me while shouting at the bus driver: “Hey man, do you like tiny red lips, do you?” She wouldn't stop shouting at him (by the way, *Tiny Red Lips and Psychopaths - A Ride on a Line 66 Bus* would be an apt title for a performance).

Since the bus driver didn't pay her any attention, she turned to me, first complimenting me on my lips and then starting to verbally abuse me. After a while, I asked the driver to let me off the bus, but he said: “Hey, can't you stay a bit longer? I need at least one sane person on this bus. I do this every day!” We talked for a while, and since he obviously knew a lot about human souls, I ended up inviting him to our rehearsals to give us feedback. I could have taken a car, but riding the bus is a good way to do research for this performance, and it also helps me in understanding the city.

I always feel deeply appreciative and privileged when I become part – however temporarily – of another world, another community. Like when I was working in Macondo, an amazing permanent refugee settlement set up in the 1950s on the outskirts of Vienna. Or in Ulan Bator, where I recently worked with artists, monks and historians from Mongolia and Europe on a stretch of land, a former park, now derelict, and one of the city's last patches of green, coveted by real estate developers – I think I told you about it when I last visited you in La r.O.n.c.e.

What am I doing in these worlds, as a visitor, as a guest? Why am I collaborating with all these different people? Is this my own, rather bumpy and awkward way of searching for a home, driven by the need to belong? Venturing out into an unknown world, trying to make the unfamiliar more familiar? Perhaps it is also a way not to get too scared of the unknown that always lurks beyond the horizon, to go forward, to engage, to get involved. My favourite technique in Aikido is *Irimi*, which means “to enter”, “to step into”, “eintreten” in German, which is more what it really is for me. It is probably my way of knocking on a neighbour's door.

In ABQ, I noticed again that I am actually more of a listener. In fact, I consider listening to be one of my artistic methods. It is not something that I would consciously choose to do, the result of a decision. It is simply something I feel I know how to do well. I begin to move, observe, get involved, act, and start to create from there.

What I bring along is lots of time. Time is important for me; time to hang out with people, sauntering through the streets. I kept lingering in this derelict park in Ulan Bator, a *non place*, to understand its rhythm, and who “lives” there. Mostly homeless people and street children, teenagers making out, lots of passers-by, security guards, stray dogs. There is an old theatre in a remote corner of the park next to a fountain run dry. Close by is a café for the *nouveaux riches*, where wedding parties are celebrated once a week.

Who are the protagonists in this world? I always feel it is best when they become part of the performance in one way or another, as performers, advisors, members of the audience, or simple onlookers. You never really know what will happen, whether they will show up – it is always a bit of a grey zone. I do not really *expect* it, it's a gift for me when they show up and engage, the only “contract” in place being our common interest.

In Ulan Bator, the core members of the crew were supposed to meet two days before the premiere, to go through the logistics of the performance in one of the final run-throughs. It was snowing and extremely cold. Four artists, our main collaborators, did not show up. We did not know what had happened. Uyanga, our production assistant, tried to call them but their phones were turned off. They did not show up the next day either. Uyanga explained that this sometimes just happens. Quoting the title of the performance, she said: *Alga Bolokh (On Disappearance)*.

The first response to my colleagues not showing up was a sense of panic, followed by resignation, as we had already faced many other difficulties. Then there was a feeling of anger. How do you deal with frustrated expectations and the anger this triggers? These are the moments when collaboration, and *how* you collaborate, is key – you wouldn't think about it if it was easy.

After trying to call them over and over again, we finally gave up. There was this moment of letting go. Understanding one's own limits and admitting the impossibility of doing anything about the situation. Getting to point zero allows you to take another look. Anyway, we ended up working without them. On the day of the performance, they finally showed up. They said they were sure that they had told us they had to take part in another performance that day. Perhaps it was me who had forgotten...

Your last sentence about love and rage stuck! Rage and love: the unity of disparate entities is also at the core of what I actually experience in this collaboration, in collaborations in general.

I am thinking about your way of dealing with crucial issues in our world, and I wonder how you cope with your anger. How do you deal with it so that you do not become overwhelmed? How do you deal with rage and love so they continue to be a driving force in your work? My experience is that it is very easy to get hurt in the process. One risks getting hurt (or hurting others) in any process, no matter how large or small it may be. This vulnerability seems to be part of any collaboration. So how do you remain open to others? Is it a conscious decision to go back to this place of love that gives you the energy to go on, and care about yourself and about your community?

Hugs!

C

France, 12th October 2015

Dear Claudia,

I'm travelling too. Much faster than you. Too fast in fact, on a nuclear-powered French high-speed train (78% of this country's electricity comes from nuclear power). And I'm surrounded by blank and inexpressive middle-class people, with good lipstick and ties. It's the calm luxury of the privileged. Ivan Illich, the great radical theologian and critic of centralised industrial society, said that "the speed at which you travel puts you into your class and company. Speed is one of the means by which an efficiency-orientated society is stratified. Fostered addiction to speed is also a means of social control."¹ The expensive high-speed railways connect metropolises, connections are made from city centre to city centre. The countryside is once again pushed to the periphery, reduced to the view from the window as we rush through in order to go somewhere else, a duct to get from a to b. Despite the fact that it grows our food, sinks our carbon, sources our water, provides our clothes, our building materials, everything we need to live – in a centralised society of speed, the countryside is no longer a "place". Illich called for "tools of conviviality", which brings us back to relationships: "con-vive", as in living together. The idea was that we must have tools that we can work with rather than for. At first, technology frees us, but eventually, within any capitalist centralised economy, we become slaves to our tools. His classic example was the motor car in the United States. He researched how many extra hours an average North American had to work to be able to afford his/her car, fuel, insurance, repairs etc. as well as the time spent looking for parking, in traffic jams etc. His conclusion: "The model American puts in 1,600 hours to get 7,500 miles, less than 5 miles an hour."² Slower than a bike! And the distances we have to deal with have a "shape and length" we can no longer control. The phantasy of autonomy that capitalism lures us with is actually a space of dependence.

And so how do we collaborate in such a society, especially where our dependence on money and on selling our time is wrapped in a culture of competition, as if it were a gift? As artists, we have been given one of the greatest gifts, a privilege that few of us use to the full: it is the ability to cross borders, to shape-shift, to live on the edge of things.

In ecosystems, it is at the edge, between a forest and a meadow for example, that biodiversity and the number of relationships between different species is highest. As a result, this is where evolution is the most powerful, where change and innovation are boosted. It is only by breaking out of our pre-determined identities and ideologies, and creating spaces that invite diversity and social experimentation, that we will build a new culture that is resilient and powerful enough to turn around the juggernaut of business-as-usual.

The artist can live in this fertile zone because she/he can open doors and go places other disciplines cannot access so easily. If you are an engineer, it is unlikely you can do this, and neither can a cook or an academic. Artists are bridge builders across differences, they can have a foot in one world while passing through others. Partly this is due to the fact that contemporary art can be everything and nothing, it is a kind of conceptual no man's land in which materials can be as varied as film or bodies, farmland or faeces, particle physics or refugees.

It is a privilege I first realised I had 20 years ago. I remember the moment, returning home after an incredibly rich 24 hours and realising that I had to make the most of this ability. I had spent that morning back in 1995 in the world of parenthood, looking after my one-year-old son. Then in the afternoon I went to a paid gig, a conference about art and activism I was giving at the posh Swedish Cultural Centre in London. Fresh from the talk, I got on a coach with 50 activists and we drove to an open-cast coal mine in Northern England, which we managed to shut down with our bodies.

This ability to collaborate across worlds has continued for me. These past seven weeks, I have been in deep negotiations in Paris with a coalition of 150 organisations, ranging from the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) to WWF, Greenpeace and Oxfam, radical collectives and the worldwide peasant farmers network La Via Campesina. The coalition will be organising actions around the UN climate summit in Paris that begins in eight weeks. The negotiations centre on whether this coalition,

which numbers many mainstream NGOs, would be open to having an act of non-violent disobedience as part of its day of action. Discussions have been long and painful, involving deep listening on our behalf and a change in our proposals (our collective was the one proposing this type of action) to continuously take into account the concerns expressed. In the end, we managed to change the culture of those organisations and they agreed to support the day of action on December 12th, which is a historic first. By operating on the edge, neither in a big organisation nor outside the network, we were able to shift things last weekend, when 500 people from around the world came together and validated the proposal.

Later in the week, I left the swanky offices of the well-paid bureaucrats of social change (the NGOs) and took the train to join a totally different world – the ZAD³, Europe’s largest post-capitalist zone, a kind of rural Occupy at the eastern edge of Brittany, half an hour’s drive from the city of Nantes. Like a rebel constellation spread across 4,000 acres of forest, farmland and marshes, it takes the form of squatted farms and fields, DIY straw bale houses, up-cycled sheds, theatres and bars cobbled from industrial pallets, hobbit-like round houses, cute cabins built from waste, huts perched frighteningly high in trees, and a multitude of other disobedient architectural phantasies.

The ZAD has been a laboratory for ways of living despite capitalism since the 2009 French climate camp. At the camp, activists and locals put together a call for people to come and live on the zone to protect it. Now you can find illegal goat herds and organic bakeries, bike workshops and bee hives, working farms and communal kitchens, a micro brewery, a mobile library, and even a pirate radio station: Radio Klaxon. Emitting from a secret location somewhere in the Zone, the station hijacks the airwaves of Radio Vinci Autoroute, the traffic information channel run by Vinci for its private network of French motorways. The world’s largest multinational construction firm, builder of nuclear power stations, African uranium mines, oil pipelines, motorways, car parks and the infrastructure of hyper-capitalism everywhere, Vinci also happens to be the company commissioned by the French government to cover this landscape in concrete and open Nantes’ new airport (it already has one). At least that has been the plan for the past 50 years, but massive joint resistance from farmers and activists has meant that every time the state comes in to try and evict people from the land, its officials fail to do so. Plans for the airport have had to be put on hold.

There I worked with people on the run from the authorities and living underground, in territory that a right-wing politician recently called “lost to the republic”. I worked with artists who have squatted farms and hackers who are breaking the law to save the climate. A few days later, I was back on a train to London, this time to give a lecture at the huge, corporate-backed Central Saint Martins school of art. There I met Lucy Orta, one of the many artists working as an “artwasher” during the Paris COP21 summit, making art for a key corporate greenwash event, Solutions COP21, which brings together some of the world’s biggest polluters, from fossil fuel corporations to car manufacturers, giants of industrial agriculture, and Vinci – the company that builds airports across the world, including at the ZAD. At this huge, fair-like exhibition, they show the public that they hold the real solutions to the climate breakdown.

Events such as these, which pretend to offer solutions for the climate crisis and yet are simply corporate criminals’ cover for business-as-usual, love to use art to make themselves appear more sophisticated and contemporary. This “artwash” cleans their logo and makes them seem less responsible for destroying communities and ecosystems for profit. A few days earlier, I had been talking to radical peasant farmers from all over the world organising to shut down the very event at which Lucy Orta was proud to show her work along with others. She claimed she had no idea that the event was sponsored by such corporations, but she only had to look at the website to know. She listened to my concerns, we will see what she chooses to do, whether her aesthetics and her ethics will be separated or not.⁴

The key to being able to navigate all these worlds is simply to pay attention to them and to be able to shape-shift to fit them, keeping our ethics grounded but shifting language and behaviour for each culture; it's like fitting into an ecosystem.

Within our collective The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (labofii), which brings together artists and activists to work without hierarchy on co-designing tools of civil disobedience, we define art as Allan Kaprow did – “simply paying attention”. This is an inherently political definition of art, for a moment of “attention” is an act of disobedience and desertion from the chaos of a society of mass attention deficit disorder. It is an ecological approach to the world, in which you attempt to place yourself in place and in time, in the moment.

“A certain discipline of the attention”⁵ is how the Invisible Committee describes communism in their manifesto *CALL*, which celebrates a radical exodus from the metropolis. To “pay attention” to the world is to communicate with it, it is a tool against separation and distraction, a weapon of reciprocal relationship. It means observing the world in the same way an artist observes her material, the cook his ingredients, the dancer her gestures, the gardener her seeds, the hacker her code. It is an act of focused sensing, not just with the eyes, but with the entire sensible mind and body. Kaprow might have called this “art”, but Buddhists call it “mindfulness”, neuroscientists “direct experience”, Christians “contemplation”, and in Arabic it is known as “sabr” – a key practice of Islam. This surrendering to the present moment that seems to be a central ritual practice of human beings bypasses the existential ego of the self and overcomes the anxiety of past and future. In such a state, we can experience information coming into our senses in real time, we pay attention to the world once again. If art is simply paying attention, then not only does it escape from the “prisons of the art world” and from the clutches of the creative classes’ monopoly on it, it also enables us to make conscious ethical choices free from the terrorising autopilot of consumer capitalism.

Far from being some kind of spiritual retreat from the world, for the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination this “paying attention” leads us to making material decisions about our everyday life, in an attempt to break down the walls between art and life. As artists and activists working towards a post-capitalist culture, we want to live the world we talk and dream about in the present moment, we want to have coherence between our ideas and our acts. All our work involves non-hierarchical processes, we have set up an organic farm and commune in our attempts to be ecologically coherent and we have not taken a flight for ten years. None of this is to be “pure”, the aim is simply to be coherent, to not separate our aesthetics from our ethics, and none of this is enough unless we are also engaged in dismantling the system of capitalism and domination that is at the root of the crisis...

JJXX

[...]

1 <http://www.preservenet.com/theory/Illich/IllichTools.html>

2 Ivan Illich: *Energy and Equity*. London: HarperCollins, 1974, p.19.

3 <http://zad.nadir.org>

4 Lucy Orta was not the only one showing work at *Solutions COP21*: others were Tomas Saraceno, Alexis Tricoire, Jean-Robert Sédano et Solveig de Ory, Pixel Carré, Cicia Hartmanndu, Barthélémy Togo, ARTPORT, Jennifer Westjohn, Wen Fang, Véronique le Mouël, Olga Kisseleva... Lucy Orta and I exchanged several interesting emails over this issue; she said that the curators’ organisation ArtCOP21 that was working with *Solutions COP21* debated whether to pull out but decided to remain on board as they were “independent” and not receiving money from the event. This notion of independence shows how far we have to go to teach each other about how power works and how art can be a tool for good and for bad.

5 *CALL*, p. 65 (<http://bloom0101.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ENGcall2.pdf>).

Anmerkung: Dieser Text ist u.a. Teil des Kompendiums Auslandskulturpolitik von EDUCULT/Wien (<http://educult.at/>).