

To stuck in_between crisis

A self-positioning

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Almost all social science articles I have read recently begin with a reference to current crises in our society. Confirming this, I could set the starting point for the following reflections here with a few quotations and references. Or I could also bundle the prevailing diagnosis of the present in my words and thus manifest and present it once again. In an attempt to confront this central perspective, three voids stand out that I would like to mention as the beginning of a self-questioning and position-taking:

1_ The recently deceased theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann, internationally known above all for his publication “Postdramatic Theatre” in which he analytically illuminates this term for theatre creation since the 1980s (Lehmann 2006), put the invoked crisis mode into perspective in the context of a guest lecture at the “Foreign Affairs” festival in 2012 (Lehmann 2012). Lehmann outlined the talk of crisis as an ideology of the present and pointed out that crises tend to be of shorter duration, but that today we are dealing with a situation that will be with us for longer. So if I want to understand the starting point in a more differentiated way, I need a less generalised and buzzword-like understanding of ‘crisis’ and its content-related connotations.

2_ The increased urgency attached to the appeal to crisis conditions is always also a rhetorical instrument. It is noticeable that a chain of arguments is built up very quickly here that seeks to induce, sometimes almost force, my mental allegiance to the scenarios presented as a way out. As necessary as a convincing analysis is for mobilising an audience,

the denunciation of one's own concerns through the subtle mobilisation of an affectively charged following is problematic in my view. The complexity and the ambivalences inscribed in it are more or less casually resolved in this strategy and end up in a simple, conclusive-sounding solution scheme. I wonder which dimensions in dealing with the comprehensive social challenges are thereby pushed into the background. In my opinion, the reflexive practice of art education must stand in opposition to this kind of rhetoric and insist on recognising complex and ambivalent issues as such and that can enable an appropriate approach to them.

3_ The invasive mode that the omnipresent 'crisis' seems to take is probably not incidental to the selection of my reading: The shattering world situation in which we all find ourselves together is the starting point and motor of my search for landmarks for a rethinking and further development of theatre pedagogy. The disorientation that arises in the course of this can be read as an attribute of my crisis in relation to the existence of professional knowledge and action. At the same time, it can create indications of predetermined breaking points between concerns and challenges that the profession is currently facing without already knowing their solution.

With the following reflections, I attempt a first classification of this initial situation and thus indirectly answer the question posed by Ole Hruschka in the *Zeitschrift für Theaterpädagogik* (Journal for Theatre Education) as to what ethical and political mandate and what aesthetic consequences we draw for our field of work from the current crises and emergencies and those predicted for the future (cf. Hruschka 2021: 4). My responses are to be read as thinking aloud with the desire to enter into a dialogue about it. It is a searching concern and is rather comparable to an initial linking of different reading experiences with one's own thinking without wanting to be a scientific theory.

1. Crisis ideologies

How we relate to the global challenges of our time is made clear linguistically. Whether we speak of climate change, climate crisis or climate catastrophe, for example, says something about how we evaluate the processes surrounding and including us and their consequences. A change suggests a rather epic development that brings about modifications without already conjuring up a threatening scenario. A crisis, on the other hand, suggests a short-term phase of radical reorientation or realignment. It demands decisions from us that will be crucial for future development. If, instead, we speak of a catastrophe, a solution-oriented approach to the crisis has already been gambled away and the conflictual disturbances have reached a dimension that no longer allows us to avoid the consequences and can only be aimed at limiting the damage.

I find myself justifying my plans and goals in a university context with the comprehensive processes of social transformation, the necessity of which no one can deny. Am I not downplaying the urgency and radicality with which we have to explore and initiate other strategies of thought and action? Or am I—unconsciously—using the idea of transformation aimed at change as a rhetorical phrase that suggests something encouraging, a backward-looking promise of a possible lifeline, despite catastrophic prospects?

In turn, crisis and catastrophe are central concepts of theatre and the performative arts. From a dramaturgical perspective, the narratives generated from them form a central axis of the time-based arts. Even an absolute standstill of the plot points to the necessity of change and plays with the consequences of inaction, which not infrequently end in catastrophe. Dealing with these common dramaturgical, dramatic and post-dramatic building blocks of theatre shapes my teaching to a considerable degree. Students, I have observed, are increasingly irritated by such thinking. They are not so much looking for the intensification of conflict, nor do they experience the development of tension in the play as a central component of performative practice. Accordingly, their designs often show experiential spaces that are immersive, focus on moments of biographical integrity or invent scenarios that convey political mes-

sages in an easily readable way. This in turn makes me think and stimulates reflection and critique of my taken-for-granted knowledge. Experiencing a difference in narrative concerns and preferred representational strategies, I find myself in a position that critically thwarts the alternative gesture of the students' theatrical language. Am I their alter ego? Is that what I am supposed to be? It also shows me that I act with an experiential knowledge that becomes fragile and evokes alternative thinking and acting. Nevertheless, I play with my now 'historical', 'classical' or 'outdated' foils and thus try to intervene in the debate. Even though irritations can be deliberately aimed at in educational contexts, I doubt their effect at this point: At a time when talk of crisis has become an everyday ideology, don't we need a different view of theatre scenarios? What could be ways of promoting knowledge that allow alternative settings? In my opinion, emerging discourses of dramaturgy, such as the consideration of *crip time* and a reversal of the parameters of attention-economies in the performing arts, already speak to this (cf. Umatham/Deck 2020). A different perspective on the relationship between theatre and reality after the social turn—beyond the presentation of everyday experts on stage or the interaction with the audience in immersive space—would be interesting in many respects in the search for expanded forms of play and performance for theatre-education contexts. Thereby, dialogue as a practice is central for me. This includes the creation of performative settings taking into account the specific contexts and framework conditions in each case—with the concern to change and shift these through dialogical practice.

Talking about social transformation processes, states of crisis or catastrophe involve both personal positioning and professional decisions. Theatre education related to educational processes suggests becoming capable of acting in an increasingly complex and ambivalent present. How and by what means the ability to act can be achieved today would have to drive the discourse in the field and accordingly give far more weight to the reference to society than has so far been the case under the goals of aesthetic education and personality development. The crisis as a momentum in which decisions are urgent and paths are taken into an-

other possible present offers us the challenge of going against the grain with our own experiential knowledge and the expertise gained from it. We do not get enough momentum for a radical change of course just by resorting to proven experiential knowledge but remain stuck to proven models of action (cf. Sack 2019). Which horizons of expectation we are able to think about within contingent realities of life plays directly back into theatre pedagogical practice. If we take the catastrophe as a starting point, dramatization and dramaturgy of situations and chains of events have a chance to test alternative futures in the here and now. The oscillation between these three parameters as a characteristic of conscious process design in performative mediation settings is still pending and can be considered a desideratum of subject didactic reflection.

2. Rhetoric & Doubt

Similarly far-reaching as the reference to global crises is the desire of art in Central Europe to be demonstrably effective. This is linked to the hope of influencing, shaping or changing people's thoughts and actions outside the aesthetic framework. This concern brings artistic work into relation with social tasks. At the same time, it refers to the ever-fragile creed "theatre can change the world" and asks about its relevance for social developments. The question of how, derived from the general longing for effectiveness, is thus conclusive: how can theatre change the world?

Thinking about this requires a determination of the relationship between artistic and political practice. Mediation aspects are currently being followed with particular attention along these two dimensions and lead to a critical theatre pedagogy. In the broader discourse, however, they also produce questionable concatenations of artistic and pedagogical arguments, operating with a fuzzy concept of mediation or the general devaluation of didactic reflection (cf. Sack 2019).

The philosopher and cultural theorist Gesa Ziemer, on the other hand, explicitly calls for an examination of pedagogical implications against the background of the artistic opening up of new forms of communication and fields of action when she asks about the value of

artistic disruptive mechanisms, potentials for irritation and innovation for areas remote from the arts or calls for exploring interfaces for a meaningful interaction between art and other areas of society (cf. Ziemer 2009).

I prefer this cautious, searching way of thinking to the rather shirt-sleeved use of mediation for the counter-hegemonic struggle as found in Chantal Mouffe's (cf. Mouffe 2014) work. As convincing as her analysis of political power relations may be, in my opinion, the use of art and culture for populist interests is rhetorically weak and problematic in terms of content (cf. Sack 2023). To claim that the strategic objective of cultural and artistic practices today is the "production of affects" [trans. by M.S.] (cf. Mouffe 2014: 18) that intervenes in the identity of social actors in order to mobilize them for political struggle (ibid.) may be effective, but from my point of view, it is not a proven theatre pedagogical motif. Along the two positions of Ziemer and Mouffe, it becomes clear that theatre pedagogical mediation moves between the poles of art and politics. In this field of tension, the balance can quickly tip to one side, and theatre can be misused as a means to another end. According to Lehmann, it works as theatre as long as it remains a practice that is closely connected to politics, but still different from politics (cf. Lehmann 2012). Far from understanding theatre only as a product or staging, Lehmann, with reference to Jacques Rancière, assumes a necessarily shared learning process through which reality can be experienced differently and precisely but must not manifest itself in a jointly asserted ideology (cf. ibid.). Rather, following Jean-Luc Nancy, he speaks of a "communauté désavouée", i.e. a community that does not realize itself in a work and thus remains without a work, so that theatre cannot help but "betray the utopian expectation of communality that it nevertheless repeatedly awakens as a practice" [trans. by M.S.] (cf. Lehmann 2012). This idea, which goes back to Derrida, is in my opinion of immense importance for theatre-pedagogical mediation practice. In this interpretation, promises of wholeness, harmony or even healing would not only be obsolete for the individual subject, but also not adequate goals for the interpersonal experiential space of collective performative practice. Rather, the ethical dimension of this thought can

be taken further with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and make us aware that aesthetic education should enable an emancipatory process that overcomes the understanding of the subject that has become dominant through the Enlightenment. Nikita Dhawan receives Spivak and emphasizes that for her the process of “othering oneself” is in the foreground, through which the subject acquires the ability to “enter into the text of another” and leave behind the supposedly own self (cf. Dhawan 2023: 67). She writes: “The ethics involved in this is in turn to be understood as an aporia in which the ethical relations of human beings to each other are recognized as a necessity as well as experienced as an impossibility.” [trans. by M.S.] (ibid.). This underlines reflexive practice as an essential moment of aesthetic education and at the same time locates it on a relational level that focuses on the relationship to the Other.

Within critical theatre pedagogy, this seems to be a way of dissolving the focus of the individual subject that predominates in the European disciplines. Just as theatre does not focus on the human being as an independent subject, but on his or her entanglement with others and the environment, i.e. relationships, pedagogical contexts are inconceivable without being-with. How we evoke this possibility of encounter, which points beyond itself, determines the effectiveness of our actions.

What is the role of aesthetics in this? Our longing to engage in political education through the imagination can be seen as equivalent to the longing of the arts for social efficacy. The expenditure or transgression of the self along practices of imagination would have to consider the Other as a binding reference point. However, if we declare political and aesthetic processes in these procedures to be structurally identical and thus exclude the essential ambivalence between aesthetic and political dimensions of action and thought, we place ourselves in the service of activist political struggle. Alternatively, if we focus precisely on the ambivalence of power relations, we elude ideological appropriation on the one hand and find our goals in the acquisition of capacities for action that deal in and with these contradictions on the other. With Spivak, such a play with the ‘double bind’ would be a worthwhile goal of aesthetic education (cf. Castro Varela/Haghighat: 12). Mediation in structures of am-

bivalence would then mean subverting the dominant ideas of theatre, representation or mediation as well as the patterns of thought and interpretation of a postcolonial culture that we have internalized, with the ideas of the subject and education inscribed in them.

3_ Where do I read myself to?

Shocked by the blindness of my own actions and thinking of only a few years ago, I feel in retrospect the catastrophe of permanent inadequacy as well as the hopelessness of achieving even a remotely satisfactory state for it or even dealing with it. I read out of a crisis, seeking discussion, stimulation, and knowledge in dialogue with other authors. I look expectantly into the process of change, already feel a whiff, want to go further and have more of it. While reading, I stumble over vocabulary and ideas that empty out. Postcolonial concepts become “empty iterations” [trans. by M.S.] (cf. Varela & Haghighat 2023: 23), the concept of education is divested (Bünger 2013), vocabulary in everyday jargon is in vogue that is unrestrainedly ripped out of other fields of knowledge and sometimes even quickly devalues conflicts and differences between positions in all sharpness (e.g., toxic, traumatic).

Referring to the discursive model of communities of practice, Rathna Ramanathan argues that learning is a process that aims to become part of a sustainable and practice-oriented community. Against the horizon of current transformation, crisis and disaster scenarios, she justifies her departure from traditional concepts of knowledge located in the minds of individuals and speaks instead of knowledge acquired through active participation in a cultural practice (cf. Ramanathan 2017). Communities of practice foreground social learning and the culture produced in each case as the backbone of teaching-learning contexts. Not only reflecting on the global contexts of action of seemingly local events, but also reacting to them in action would be a longing of theatre pedagogical practice for today. Performing Arts in Contexts (PAC) wants to offer a possible framework for this. If the international networking of teachers initiated by PAC can be further developed into a practice that is dialogue-based

and critically grounded, then expanded capacities for action for global and local challenges could be gained along the way. With Homi Bhabha, such a practice would imply that our ways of life, projects and communities are intertwined (cf. Bhabha 2017: 44). As a consequence, these would be occasions for a transformation of theatre education. The art of becoming an ambivalent community in which we practice nonconformity attracts my interest.

The prerequisite for this seems to me to be an understanding of education that is “to be understood as ambiguous in a constitutive way” [trans. by M.S.] (Bünger 2013: 17). This leaves room for the different social conditions and practices of the social in which we are all involved and which constitute us as subjects. Understanding this ambivalence as productive and recognizing in it the ‘politicity of education’ could free us to some extent from the grip of prevailing theoretical constructs and possibly even open up alternative, hybrid spaces in the respective understanding of the profession (ibid.). For theatre pedagogical action and its political implications, the reflection of real conditional structures on the one hand, and the transcriptions and transgressions of currently valid or common social practices produced in the fictional framework on the other hand, are accordingly groundbreaking. Locating education where the constitution of the I take place in the We forces a reflexive approach to the taken-for-granted agreements of common action. In this way, cultural practices become conscious, describable and thus possibly also changeable. Performing Arts in Contexts grows through actions that form culture. It is in_between.

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